



THE UNION IN CHAINS



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CONTENTS

Shadow of the Tyrant	3
A Fate Unknown	6
Exiled to the Depths	17
Lady Death	28
Vengeance	39
Nobility Reborn	53
Bloody Sunset	56
Inheritor	60
The Unbinding	64
The Ferryman's Puppet	69
The Lunar Glaive	72
The Silent Curse	75

SHADOW OF THE TYRANT

Natural light did not exist in this forgotten place. The only illumination was cast by flickering candles set into alcoves in the walls, several of them already exhausted from where flame hungrily consumed their wax. What little artificial light remained was reduced to a pittance, colouring the figures inside the cramped cell in a sickly yellow glow.

The Saint silently stared at the sorry figure before her, his body suspended from the high ceiling by thick rope. The rough material had already proven too abrasive even after so short a time, the flesh around the captive's wrists visible as pink and swollen between heavy knots. She reached back with one gauntleted hand before slapping him across the face with all the strength she could muster.

'So, this is to be your fate, Rabia? Dragged into these depths along with the rest of your miserable cadre and left to rot? You and your kind disgust me. If it were my order, you would be long dead and our time would not have been wasted.'

'Nor... nor the lives of your men, neither.' Rage's voice was a coarse rumble, as dry as his dark humour.

Grace felt her face flush at his unrepentant reply. Biting her tongue, she abruptly turned to leave, the tail of her robes cutting through the air. The Inquisition could beat such impudence out of the wretch. Alongside, Benediction offered one final baleful glare

before departing with her.

Alone, Rage cackled to himself, despite how the sound wracked his throat. Solthecians were ever the easy targets; he had yet to meet one without a stick up their arse.

‘Of course. Just like you, bullying those who can’t fight back.’ The voice drifted through his mind unbidden, the words sharp enough to cause the Union thug to pinch his eyes. ‘I don’t remember you having the spine to stand up like that against a real threat.’

‘Get fucked.’ Rage didn’t know when talking to the voice had become commonplace. Once, he had refused it with all of his being, he dimly recalled.

That time was far past.

‘How imaginative. Tell me, is that the same eloquence which will see you free of this miserable cell, and talk you out of a worthless death down in these depths?’

Rage refused to answer, sullenly pulling at his restraints.

‘I thought so. Save your strength, Usurper. Hear the footsteps in the distance? That will be the boots of your torturer – a vicious man, servant to only bloody and unconscionable deed. He’ll break you. Drive nails into you, or tear parts of you away until you submit.’

‘Looking forward to that, are you, Blackheart? Don’t count on it. I’ve killed and gutted bigger men before – just like I did to you.’

‘Yet, am I truly gone, Rage? You should have known better than to try and end my saga. The tale of the Pirate King is one yet to end...’

Rage could only close his eyes and try to ignore the deafening laughter echoing through his head, as the shadow of the tyrant consumed him once more.

— A FATE UNKNOWN —

Light flooded into the empty chamber, coloured in faint hues of red and green from the faded staining in the glass dome above. Motes of dust fluttered through the air like tiny fireflies, tumbling ever downwards in lazy spirals. A peaceful stillness had taken hold of this place and refused to relinquish it, entirely at odds with the sinister darkness lurking in the catacombs below.

Grace stood in quiet contemplation of the scene, light reflecting from her pristine robes in a blinding glare. Her lip curled. She cared little for this place. A long-abandoned chapel built atop an ancient temple ruined some centuries past, the neglect of this sacred ground was an offence against Solthecius himself.

The Inquisitor's dilapidated surroundings offered little to placate to her condemnation. The elements had not been kind to a building standing unattended for so many years, her eye picking out places where walls had crumbled and fallen in, and dark metalwork was spotted with orange. Tall windows, once proud and vibrant, had grown dull in their frames; the panes from several others shattered over the floor in pointed shards of multicoloured glass.

This remote shrine would be impure forevermore, sins of the past having rendered it far beyond the limits of mortal sanctification. The order had allowed the lonely site to be quietly forgotten over the years as the trail of attendant worshippers had slowly reduced

to a trickle, content that the pious should never know of its existence. It was probable the dusty flagstones had known neither foot nor knee for decades until the arrival of the Inquisition, the carpets once covering them having rotted away long since.

But, Grace was not here to kneel in supplication.

A warren of tunnels hid underfoot, a sprawling dungeon first created for the primitive temple a thousand years ago, made into a labyrinthian maze by the architects of the chapel erected in the time since. They had not been alone in their attentions. Nature too had touched the confusing hive of forgotten cells and foetid cellars just as it had the land above, shuddering tremors and flooding causing irreversible destruction in the depths. Fraught with collapsed ceilings and impassable corridors, even the most recent map was hopelessly obsolete.

It was the perfect prison for as vile a fraternity as the Union.

Despite the length of leash allowed him by the new Bacchus, Rage had quickly proven too wild a dog to be left to his own devices, his rebellious instinct too fractious to be of use. Grand plans for the treacherous cadre spoiled, Pious VI had not sat idle in retaliation. His Inquisitors' mission of stewardship soon become one of hunter and prey, Grace and Benediction ordered to entomb each member of the Union underground, far from the eyes of man.

Their first quarry had been Rage himself, the

vicious thug now imprisoned in a cell as bleak as his blackened heart. His capture in particular had been a dark enough deed to cost of the lives of three initiates, each bloodied by his wicked cleaver until their bodies moved no more. Pursuit of the other wolves in his ruthless pack had been less barbaric, yet none had come easily.

The Saint would have lied if she did not admit to a sense of satisfaction in persecuting such reprehensible scum. She had readily paid penance each night, quickly reaching forgiveness for her behaviour in service of the August Lord. Her conscience remained as pure as her unbroken innocence.

Footsteps cut through the silence and from the corner of her vision, Benediction's immense frame appeared. Unlike Grace, he wore his armour and faceplate, his robes dirtied from travelling through the depths below. Behind him he dragged a long chain, metal links clinking together as they writhed, the final malefactor struggling in vain against the hard iron.

The witch had arrived.

The woman had been a dishevelled mess even before she had been dragged from her den, clothes a tattered collection of unwashed rags, her hair matted into thick dreadlocks. She reeked as only an individual with an aversion to bathing could, a musky stench of dried sweat and mould.

Grace's eyes narrowed, a sadistic smile creeping across her features. Hemlocke deserved cleansing in

more ways than one. Amongst all of her miserable brethren the witch offended the order most, by defying the very word of Solthecius with her sacrilegious profanity. She belonged in the dark ages past, a slave to the pagan beliefs of man when he had paid fealty to the elements and the stars above.

Sensing the contemptuous stare, the witch turned her head towards Grace, only to wilt and avert her tortured eyes as she shrank away again. The brief glimpse revealed pupils dilated to monstrous proportions, all trace of colour replaced by heavy black orbs. Doubtless, Hemlocke had been sampling her own stock.

A vicious yank of her collar dragged the witch under the light of the grand dome, painting her in dappled hues. She reacted by clawing at the chain and shrieking at her tormentor.

'No blind man should see as you, giant. You are unnatural, an abomination!' The sudden outburst was the first collection of legible words the woman had offered since her capture, the rest only gnashing of teeth and forlorn wailing.

Hemlocke's spite earned her a backhanded slap across the mouth, the impact whipping her delicate neck backwards. When her head swung back again she glared murderously, bloated eyes unblinking. A thin trail of red trickled over her chin, and the witch defiantly spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm onto the floor, crimson covering a cross carved into the stone.

She grinned, teeth stained pink. 'The Old Ones care little for your pretend lord, or the misguided fools who follow him. You are as powerless as the lies your kind peddle, and these worthless icons crumbling under my heel.'

Benediction punished her blasphemy again, a huge hand seizing Hemlocke by the throat and roughly hauling her into the air. His head swung around to Grace as the witch's hands scrabbled at his grip, blank mask somehow conveying his silent question.

Grace took a moment to savour the undiluted panic over Hemlocke's features. Her face was turning a painful shade of purple, her legs frantically kicking on tiptoes. The witch was clearly running out of breath, her sullen tongue silenced but for a strangled gasp.

The Saint shook her head.

Benediction gave one last cruel squeeze before hurling the Union scum away, her body tumbling through the air until she landed amongst the rotting remnants of a row of pews. The witch struck the wood with a sickening thud, an agonised scream torn from her lungs on impact. Her voice trailed into a rasp as she slipped to the floor like a child's discarded ragdoll.

Hemlocke lay still amongst the splintered wood, only movement a tremble as she sobbed pathetically. The line of red across her chin had become a wide river, pooling on the old stone beneath her.

'I will not pretend you do not deserve death for your sins, witch. You are barely a trial in our holy mission,

a trivial distraction at most. Perhaps death would provide the best form of censure for one such as you, rather than imprisonment.' Hemlocke didn't react to the words, her eyes still closed.

Grace glanced at her companion. His mask hid any hint of expression, but Grace knew his judgement would match hers regardless. The heathen woman's fate was sealed in a moment of unspoken communion.

'Illuminate her.' With the slightest nod, the Virgin Sister signalled her guardian into action once more. An armoured boot stepped forward from under his robes, catching the light in spite of a thin layer of grime.

Hemlocke lurched up into the air, a marionette with her strings suddenly pulled taught. Her hands scratched at the air, nails clawing like talons clutching invisible rungs. Back straight as a rod, the witch's head snapped towards Grace, eyes rolled back to become milky orbs. She bared her teeth in a feral grin.

Benediction broke into a run, hands reaching for her, but the witch slipped away as though possessed by a devil, her nimble agility at odds with how erratically her limbs moved. She reached the nearest window in moments, the tall glass pane already shattered inwards. Without breaking her unnatural gait Hemlocke launched herself through the opening, disappearing but for a bloody scrap of cloth.

Benediction roared in frustration, punching an armoured fist into the wall. He looked back towards Grace, tilting his head downwards in self condemnation.

The Saint's smile returned. It was time to persecute the hunt once more.

Hemlocke's eyelids slowly parted, her vision blurry and indistinct. Whatever spirits had aided her escape had scattered, leaving her entirely mortal once more, a broken shell stretched over weak and bruised flesh.

As her senses returned she became slowly aware she lay at the bottom of a shallow ditch, muddy water soaking through her clothes, icy cold against her clammy skin. It seemed some time had elapsed since her flight, the avatar of the Father fallen from the blank skies to usher in the dominion of the Goddess. The landscape was coloured a pale hue, the faint and ethereal light birthing a deep shadow in the recess where she now languished.

Her ears detected nary a hint of pursuit, but Hemlocke knew the accursed holy men would still be searching for her. She was the last of the Union to have evaded them, and their kind did not rest easily. They would hunt for her until her last breath, the chase as relentless as their passion for their falsehood god.

She groaned, knowing she was poor game presently.

Her forehead was warm and fevered; from her short breath and a dull ache in her flank she was likely wounded inside, the taste of coppery blood painted over her lips. Two of the fingers on her left hand

were broken, pointing in unnatural directions. With her frenetic scramble apparently ceased some hours before, Hemlocke feared that if she tried to move her body would not obey.

She was a shattered figure, collapsed in a bolthole and awaiting death.

Hemlocke closed her eyes once again. If the gods wanted to take her, she would gladly relinquish her life to them. Even in this state, she was their servant, and she dared not betray the ancient oaths of her order. In a faltering mumble, she began to mouth ancient words from the rite of ending.

An image appeared in her mind, her voice faltering as the words inexplicably caught in her throat. She felt herself frown outwardly as the vision expanded and a fine lunar mist eclipsed all, covering every surface and leaving her numb. Somewhere in the distance faint silhouettes moved, their forms indistinct and wreathed by billowing clouds. Whenever she would strain her eyes to concentrate on one it would become intangible, only to maddeningly reappear some distance away.

Their voices echoed through the murky gloom, words illuminating each spirit momentarily with sparks of colour against the grey background.

‘What do you want for this one’s release?’ Even distorted the first voice was deep enough to be undeniably male, strong and powerful, the speaker glowing bright amber.

‘A gesture, support in coming trials.’ The second voice was a sinister hiss, the slither of a serpent baring its fangs.

‘Very well.’ Hemlocke felt uncertainty creep into the first speaker’s tone, and saw a shard of cold ice break through his aura, a jagged line of canker, twisted and bitter. He reluctantly spoke again after a pause. ‘We shall enter into agreement with you.’

The second spirit did not reply, instead sweeping around to face her as the mists surrounding them whipped up into a storm. His eyes bored into hers for a moment through the turmoil, and a cold sweat dripped down her spine. The vortex spun faster, accompanied by the shrieking of a thousand crows, swirling forward to envelop her within a cloak of charcoal feathers.

His face coalesced inches before her own, the spirit became a horrific visage of a cloaked devil, a skull with sharpened teeth leering from the folds of blackened sackcloth.

‘You are not supposed to be here, witch. Why have you transgressed into this past?’ His dark words were the chill of the grave, morbid and flat, bereft of any trace of warmth.

Hemlocke found herself unable to answer, terror seizing her breath and suffocating her. Her knees buckled as her essence ebbed away, drawn on strings leading to his skeletal fingers.

The devil’s hold was broken in a howl of agony, a spear of light skewering the enveloping darkness,

warmth flooding through the rent to return life to the world once again. On the other side, she could see the first speaker, his golden aura strong and restored. He shielded another figure, a bestial creature which snarled furiously, and clacked her slavering jaws.

‘Come, Hemlocke! Quickly!’ This voice was female, the animalistic snarl familiar somehow. ‘Salvation!’

Hemlocke’s reply was drowned out by the murder of crows, a jagged cacophony which lashed at the golden figure and reopened the rent in his soul, allowing the ice to pour in.

She felt herself slipping away, the vision pulling itself to the edge of her consciousness. She desperately tried to reach her hands outwards, still unable to wrest meaning.

‘Run! Run, Hemlocke! Whilst you can, come to us!’ The urgent voice broke through once more, faint and quickly fading, swallowed by a tide of rolling mists, retreating away into the aether.

Hemlocke’s head recoiled, a great breath forcing itself into her lungs with a violent shudder. Her eyes open, she saw that day had come once more. Somewhere nearby, she could hear footfall in the undergrowth, dried leaves cracking under booted heel.

It was time to flee her hiding place. The gods had seen fit to send her portents once more, and where they beckoned she would follow without question. She scrambled to her feet, forcing herself to ignore a sharp spike of pain in her chest. Her role in the

machinations of the Old Ones was far from over, her
future undecided, a path untraveled.

And her side yet to be chosen.

EXILED TO THE DEPTHS

Rage bellowed into the gag, a viscous line of drool escaping over his chin. Saliva coated his chest already, shirt stripped away by a rusty knife and the shreds thrown into a corner. Above him his wrists were tied tightly, arms supporting the weight of his body as his feet dangled through the empty air, inches above the stone tiles.

For all his willingness to demonstrate a sadistic streak the torturer was yet to speak a single word, content to conduct his spiteful attentions in silence. When the Inquisitor had first entered the cell, the candle in his hand had revealed a body small of stature but for an enormous pot belly, and cursed with a face ugly enough to make whores turn him away. Rage didn't need to be able to see his tormentor now to imagine a pair of piggy eyes gloating in vicious excitement from under the heavy brow.

Rage knew the type all too well. Small-minded, vicious men with no redeemable qualities to name, or for others to follow; this was the only power they had, breaking a captive man as if their life depended on it. Each grunt or scream gave them something, but seeing fear in their victim's eyes meant victory. Once they had wormed their way into the soul they would never truly leave.

Rage was far from afraid, but kept his eyes closed in petty defiance anyway. The Inquisitor would have to

take his satisfaction from his own spiteful tendencies alone.

The torturer leaned in once more, and heat from the naked flame seared Rage's skin, cooking him like a joint of meat. Gleefully the man held the candle to his victim's ribs for a second too long, enough for a fresh spike of pain as the tip touched the flesh, before pulling it away again. The flame removed, Rage immediately sagged against the ropes, muscles releasing their taut hold over his body.

Still he kept his eyes closed, skin pinched at his temples.

'Look at him!' Blackheart's voice came through as loud as ever. *'Don't think that you'll be able to avoid opening your eyes forever. Or perhaps you will... like the coward you truly are. Is that it? A craven and spineless sycophant, lying to yourself that you're too brave to open your eyes, when you're really too afraid to meet the stare of another man without a knife in your hand?'*

Rage grunted, and forced his eyes open in response. He was many things, but yellow was not one of them.

Blackheart's evil laugh echoed in his skull. *'Some act of resistance, Usurper. Are you always so easily goaded?'*

Rage mumbled a reply into the dirty rag blocking his mouth, attracting the attention of the Inquisitor. The man appeared in front of him, staring hard.

'You can feel his judgement, can't you? Sense his disgust at the scars crossing your back, the brand of the lash from years past. No one should wear shame like yours, traitor.'

Blackheart chuckled. *'But then, he probably mistook you for a man. We both know better. Do you know if he's seen the weakness carved into your wrists?'*

Rage screamed, fury lending the strength to pull at his restraints. Flakes of dust trailed down from the ceiling and stuck to the sweat on his skin. Blackheart's cruel words were a barb cutting into his flesh, poison coursing through his veins.

'You forget that I know you, Usurper. I can hurt you worse than this petty fool with his rusty nails and clumsy pincers ever could, even more than the flame in his hands. I know the truths you hide, those which burn you more horrifically than he might ever accomplish.' Blackheart's voice took on a foreboding sinister tone, his words a cold caress from beyond the grave. *'I will break you, just as I have every other pitiful soul before.'*

Unknowingly, the torturer turned Rage's scathing retort into an incoherent roar by forcing the candle into his blackened flank, under the pit of one arm. The flame extinguished almost immediately, the sharpest pain quickly dulling, but melted wax scalded already bruised skin agonisingly. With a violent shudder, Rage yelped one last time and then was still, his head hanging low.

Alone, the Inquisitor chortled darkly to himself, face contracted to an animalistic sneer by the candlelight.

Content to move the prisoner to the rack, he turned his back to sorry spectacle and started releasing the knotted rope hooked to the wall. Body blocking most

of the light, his fingers fumbled noisily in the darkness for what seemed like an age, until the old rope finally relinquished its hold. Somewhere behind him he heard Rage's body collapse to the ground with a thud.

He paused to get his breath back, leaning one spindly arm on the wall before him. The struggle with the frayed rope had been surprisingly difficult, and he cursed once more that the order had not spent more coin on hiring guards for this sort of duty.

His guttural stream of profanity was broken by a gravelly voice in the darkness behind, a throaty rasp from a throat ruined by screaming.

'I am no stranger to torture; stronger than death itself, I am a legend that could not be felled by the hand of a worthless bastard like you. I will not be broken.'

Barely a terrified squeak more escaped the torturer before Rage was upon him.

For the thousandth time, Svetlana cursed her poor judgement. She laboured under no illusions it had not led her to this place, imprisoned in the darkness of a forgotten ruin, wasting away in a subterranean hell. She glared pointedly around her. This sty would make a peasant blush, let alone nobility boasting as distinguished a lineage as she.

In spite of her dark mood, Decimate had to laugh at that. The Volstov name had meant so little to her for

so long, it now seemed ill fitting in the extreme. Ever since she forsook her family for the fraternity of the criminal underworld she had ceased to belong their dynasty, her parents likely to have thought her dead long since.

She might have called that her first mistake, leaving a life of unashamed opulence for one in the gutter, but her memories of fighting through the sewers and tunnels of the undercity were fond ones. She still remembered the faces of each and every ganger; recalled boisterously drinking with them until the early hours of the morning, bedding those bold enough to pursue her.

Her younger days hadn't always been like that though.

Svetlana had seen her share of darkness in the depths. Even now nightmares might wake her gasping for breath, as urgently as when she'd been forced to flee for her life, the screams of her allies still ringing in her ears. When she opened her palm, she could still see the white lines drawn as blood oaths for the fallen. They carved their way through her skin in jagged white rows, severing the fate trails to be found there.

A superstitious old fool read Svetlana's palm once, and become convinced those scars had stolen her future, leaving only hard reminders of the past. She'd laughed at that.

In the years that followed, she became a legend. Decimate, the duellist and bravo, dancing across

the pitch with absolute impunity. She missed that period of her life most passionately. The warmth of fellowship amongst her adopted family in the Brewer's Guild had been second to none, a natural evolution of the brotherhood they shared in the depths. Survivors of those dark days, united in triumph.

Her mind would have struggled to conjure a starker contrast between that time and her service in the Union. Blackheart had ruled his crew with an iron fist, his dominant will an unspoken threat to mercilessly crush all opposition, earning him the ire of each of his teammates. When the moment came to cull him from their number at last, Decimate had watched with ill-suppressed passion, barely able to stop herself from cheering.

But then Rage's reign began.

Under their new captain, the Union had become a band of common mercenaries hiding behind a rotting facade. He whored his followers to the highest bidder, banishing or murdering the Longshanks standing in his path until none dared oppose him.

The first to step across the line and accept his bloody coin, Decimate had borne the brunt of the resistance to her new liege from her teammates. It wore her down as much as Rage did, sending her increasingly farther afield as his bitter legacy grew, and with even more frequency than the other players.

She knew she'd earned him a fortune from the coffers of the Mason's Guild alone, a team she spent so much time amongst that Mallet scathingly asked her if

she wanted her own kit in their colours.

Decimate might have run the old bastard through for his impudence, had she not been desperate to find allies outside of the Union. It was unlikely the Brewer's Guild would welcome her back into the fold, and so she'd been forced to turn her eye to the teams she played for during Rage's regime.

The Masons were but one option, albeit the most receptive. With the First Lady absent and the team's morale plummeted to a desperate low after the events of the Sovereign States final, they made easy pickings.

Other Guilds were not in such weak positions. Pin Vice had made her lack of interest in any arrangement clear during their last meeting, and Ballista was exiled. The Alchemists had no coin for their own players, let alone her. Bedding down with the Butchers would be as foolhardy and dangerous as remaining with the Union. Fleeing Rage would mean forever fearing a knife in her back; she had no wish to join a fraternity where another blade could be slipped between her ribs just as easily.

Decimate snorted. That was the predicament of yesterday.

Her only choice now was whether she chose to die with dignity, wasting away in proud silence, or shame herself by begging with whatever captors ruled this infernal gaol.

Rage's grimy hands closed around the guard's throat, white crescents under his nails contrasting sharply against flushed fingertips as he pressed into soft flesh. His victim struggled beneath him, one hand locked around his wrist and the other clenched in a fist which struck ineffectually, the blow progressively weaker each time.

He howled jubilantly, a vicious grin struck over his features. Moments like this were when the vicious thug felt truly alive. He barely felt the blows. He was a god, simple flesh made divine as he elevated himself through lawless and unrepressed abandon.

The soldier's mouth opened and closed in a gurgling scream, the man coughing bloody bubbles as his delicate neck was crushed. The human body was poorly designed to suffer such abuse, and with a final, violent shudder, his eyes rolled back into his skull.

The guard was still, his life expended.

Breathing heavily, Rage stared at the corpse disdainfully now that his high had passed. His assailant had been little more than a youth, only a faint line of dirty blonde hair on his upper lip, turned copper from the blood. He opened and closed his hands, dirty skin stained by trails of the same claret red, bloody sin running over his forearms and already beginning to dry.

'Did it feel good, Usurper?'

He spat a reply through gritted teeth. 'Fuck you and your mocking words, Blackheart. I've long since run out of time for you.'

‘You’re only hiding, trying to keep the pain away. Why not embrace it? Look at yourself, at your bruised flesh. Pain is all that you are now, carrion waiting for death to claim you. Killing doesn’t give you command – you have nothing still, not even that which you tried to steal from me.’

Rage’s snarl became a grin. The Pirate King was wrong. He had wrested all the power he needed with this foul deed.

He had a weapon now.

His hand reached down towards the sandy tunnel floor, bloody fingers tightening around the haft of the guard’s guisarme. The blade was pristine in the soft light, sharp edges glowing umber, and Rage wondered if the boy had ever wielded it against another man before. It looked far too clean to be a veteran’s weapon. No man of any experience would have brought such a weapon into these tunnels besides, so poorly was it suited to the tight confines.

The misjudgement had cost the young man his life.

Grudgingly, Rage was forced to admit Blackheart did at least have one thing right. He was still lost in the darkness of this damned labyrinthian prison, shut away beneath the earth. The walls and ground were so indistinguishable that he’d probably been wandering in circles for hours.

‘You’re going to die down here, cowering and afraid of the dark. How long before you turn the blade on yourself, like before?’

Rage wished he had something to cover his exposed wrists.

'You can't hide them from me, Usurper. They speak to me, tell me you'll try again.'

'Get bent, Pirate King.' Rage muttered the reply whilst hitting his palm into his temple, hammering away at his skull in a vain attempt to drown Blackheart's voice out.

'Did you wonder where all of the others went, Usurper? I killed them all, even bloodthirsty Red, and Purple, all high and mighty. They're gone now, forevermore.'

'Good. Did me a favour for once, you bastard.'

'But now, you're all that's left, Rage. Just you. I took their lives, so it could just be me and you down here, all alone in the dark. We were brothers once, before your betrayal. Before your contagion stole the throne.' Blackheart chuckled. 'In death, we shall be again.'

Rage imagined for a moment the corpse behind him lurching to its feet, its features contorted into a hideous likeness of Blackheart, slack jaw open in sinister merriment. Foul talons reached for him, pestilent and infectious, a ruinous poison racing through the air.

'Are you prepared? Ready to be claimed? You cannot keep running Rage.'

'Never!' He twisted to face his undead adversary, lantern held in a shaking fist. The corpse remained lifeless in the flickering amber light, cast with a sickening warmth to match the murder he'd just committed.

Rage studied it for a long moment, before a familiar grin crept across his face, his eyes settling on a set of heavy iron keys attached to the lad's belt.

His actions would be another act of defiance, just as petty and weak as that which Blackheart had accused him of hours before.

But he didn't have to be alone with the Pirate King after all. And that would be worth admitting he had failed himself this one time, at least.

LADY DEATH

Dank brick walls surrounded Gutter on all sides, coloured mottled green and brown. They hemmed her in oppressively, a solid barrier broken only by a tiny window set high in one corner, admitting a trickle of low light between rusted iron bars.

Judging by the staining on the murky walls her cell had flooded in the past, and the rain drumming against the brickwork now was disconcerting. She had heard plenty of stories of prisons in her homeland designed to admit in sewer water through such windows, and with it all manner of vile rodents.

Being stripped to the bone by vermin was not a fate to wish upon anyone.

Gutter stretched out on the rotten wood of her cot, willing herself to be tired enough to sleep. As they had been each time she lay down, her eyes were drawn to the Fisherman's Guild icon carved into the wall. Her only notion of human contact in this wretched cell, it had presumably been scratched into the brick by the previous occupant, not yet severely discoloured or aged. Whomever it was had blotted out another glyph adjacent which she recognised as belonging to the Butcher's Guild, the crossed cleaver and knife motif still faintly visible.

She wondered at the fate of that person. Had they died in this hole, shut away from the world outside, forgotten and alone? Was that to be her fate also?

Perhaps it was.

And maybe this was the best place for her anyways, the poor little Erskirii princess who was a slave to her own fear and self-loathing.

Her throat parched, Gutter slid off her cot and padded over to the slick wet stone below the window, head tilted upwards and mouth open to catch whatever spattering of moisture she could. It would have been a wasted venture had she not been so contemptibly thirsty, most of the water hitting her face and doing nothing to slake her thirst.

At least it was vaguely refreshing.

After several minutes, she gave up and wandered aimlessly back to her cot. No matter how she cursed herself for her foolishness, the young woman knew she'd return if they didn't bring her water again soon. Gutter hadn't decided whether the guards in this place were deliberately torturing her, or simply negligent in their duties. They only seemed to bring sustenance after large intervals that left her stomach aching and throat dry, no matter how she rationed herself. The last flask sat under the window, finally drained yesterday but still hopelessly empty.

Gutter collapsed onto the old wood, her mind too fatigued to be furious for once. That alone might have been a blessed respite in different circumstances. Her life had given her plenty of fuel for vehemence, and she could no longer recall a time when a veil of raw, seething anger hadn't covered her eyes. Suddenly

being free of that curse was disorientating.

She had long since given up any attempt to understand her time amongst Blackheart's crew, her memories tainted by a hazy mist of revulsion and contrasting affection towards the Pirate King. Reflecting upon the past she knew that had been when she first broke, her fragile mind pushed so far as to shatter, destroying all reason.

Whatever girl she had been never returned from that hellish ship. The princess was dead, replaced by the ruthless and heartless bitch, the woman that gutted the men who came for her until she gained notoriety enough to be left well alone.

Yet, she'd somehow forged a new life for herself whilst surrounded by the worst scum in the world, the very dregs of humanity. Throughout it all the Pirate King had been there, watching, witnessing her slow corruption. He stoked the darkness inside, directed and shaped it, until Gutter became an instrument of his wrath amongst the crew; a willing slave to worse cruelty than she ever thought imaginable.

She'd loved him once, she was sure. Part of her still did. It warred with the slither of reason still left to her mind, the splinter of civilisation lost in a world of lawless treason and betrayal.

Freedom had failed to come when Rage stole the throne. That day colour faded from her life instead, to leave Gutter laconic and bitter - and the void was soon replaced with indiscriminate fury, her accumulated

hatred within unleashed at last. Several times since she had murdered men and women for little to no reason, dragging her victims into shadowy alleys to bleed until they ceased to be. Others she killed for coin, becoming a brutal assassin with no regard for her own life as she indulged in horrific acts of bloodletting.

None of it brought her peace.

She had known killers plying their unwholesome trade for pleasure or to exact twisted dominance, but for Gutter it was a belligerent attempt to force her way back to the world, bathing her path bloody red. Each failed attempt bred more frustration and impotent aggression.

She reserved the most focussed hatred and bile for Rage. Even more than she loathed herself she despised the man who ended the false sense of security she once clung to. He had sent her world into ruin for a second time, crushing the illusion of stability and forcing her to confront what she'd become. For months she'd stalked him, patiently waiting for the time she would claim her vengeance.

The Inquisition had captured them all before she could enact her revenge. Even Gutter, divorced from the fraternity of the Union, was not spared their attention. And now she found herself becalmed, a ship in the eye of the storm, staring at cold walls.

Every step of her life had been bent towards escaping imprisonment. First from Blackheart's crew, and then from Blackheart himself - and just as she'd thought herself free, the traitor had given her a new cage. This

place was only another gaol, one more infernal pit into which she fell as she reached the cusp of freedom.

It was of no concern. This place was no more or less foreboding than the others. Sooner or later, Gutter knew the world would run out of bars to contain her.

Grace squatted down next to the corpse. Lifeless and pathetic, the guard only looked like a victim in the light, long shadows casting his boyish face mournfully. His eyes stared directly at her from where he lay, bruised neck twisted unnaturally to the side. Once she might have been shocked at the silent accusation she sensed in their glare, at the disdain of the dead.

Not now.

The Virgin Sister Extant existed no longer, that wilting rose long plucked by the word of the Bacchus. Now Grace was only Inquisitor, sentence and punishment both for the ranks of heretics under her heel. The only honour she could bestow upon this fallen soldier was to leave his eyes open, so he might see the benevolence of the August Lord as his soul passed.

She reached down and roughly pushed the boy's eyelids closed. He had failed in his duty, a crime unworthy of reward. Let his weakness curse him to an existence in purgatory.

If Benediction cared for her behaviour he chose not to voice his opinion. Her sentinel stood to one side,

the height of this tunnel a rare instance within the labyrinth where he could stand up straight. His long blade was drawn, prepared if the boy's murderer was fool enough to revisit the scene of his heinous sin.

Rage was the only member of the Union to have escaped the captivity of his cell so far, but it was likely he now possessed keys to free the others, assuming he could find them. Although the guards stationed within had begun the hunt, few possessed the piety to care for the task. Their prey was a dangerous killer, and Grace doubted the mercenaries would risk life and limb for the paltry coin she paid.

This foolish boy had been the exception, likely hungry enough for pride and ambition to cast common sense aside. A thought occurred to Grace as she contemplated the fate of such inexperience. She stood, the guard at her feet now forgotten.

'Perhaps we should look to a different resource for this hunt. Even if the sellswords found their quarry, I doubt they would rush to recapture him.' Benediction remained impassive, nodding once in agreement. 'What we truly require is an individual with their own motivation, something which cannot be so easily dismissed.'

As she did so often of late, Grace wore a cruel smile under her mask. 'Our master has been an inspiration in many things, and pragmatism is one of them. I am not above following his example of using vermin to track and kill their own.'

Her mind made, she turned on her heel and strode

into the waiting darkness, Benediction stalking behind her as closely as a shadow.

Gutter was startled from her thoughts by a key turning in the lock of her cell door, metal scraping together to emit a series of clicks. She watched warily as the heavy wooden barrier swung inwards with agonising slowness, aged joints protesting with a loud creaking sound.

Beyond stood one of her captors, a hooded figure wearing an expressionless mask which betrayed little.

'You are the one named Gutter.' The voice was undeniably female to match the figure's slight frame. Contempt soaked through her clipped tone, dismissive and hostile both.

Gutter stared blankly.

'Speak, wretch!' Any pretence of calm was suddenly gone as the Inquisitor swept into the room, long robes trailing behind her. Gutter had a second to step back before she was grasped by the shoulder and slammed into the wall behind, the sudden assault driving her to her knees.

Gasping for air, she glared upwards at her captor. 'I... I am the Gutter. Mur-Murderer... of the innocent, Blackheart's Life... Drinker.' She spat the words into the air as much as said them, wet saliva coating the Inquisitor's fine robes. 'Does that answer meet with...

with your approval?’

Her attacker judged her from behind the mask. Light reflected over the smooth surface from the torch in the woman’s hand, bare flames painting a dancing avalanche of gold that never quite managed to reach the shadows of the eye sockets. A moment passed between them in silence, both women unmoving but for Gutter’s laboured breathing.

‘Nothing would see me happier than to see you cleansed from this world, scum. You, and your vile associates are unworthy of redemption.’ The cold voice was a dramatic contrast to the warmth of the light. ‘But, my master has taught me the limited worth your miserable kind hold.’

Gutter didn’t dignify the statement with a response. If one was expected, it would have to be beaten out of her. She stared back insolently, waiting for the next words.

‘You know your kin are trapped here with you, and we both know you to be unwelcome amongst them. Rage would have your head mounted next to that of your black-hearted tyrant, and pay any one of your traitorous brotherhood their weight in bloody coins for the trophy.’

Gutter felt her skin flush in familiar anger, the woman’s words drawing a vicious nail through an open wound. Still she bit her tongue, determined to be remain stoic until forced to submit again.

She was done with weakness.

‘Good... I see seething fury still resides within.’ Her

reaction seemed to amuse the Inquisitor. 'My words are spoken true; you are alone amongst these wolves, a loner no longer welcome amongst the pack. You may have no soul worthy of saving, but perhaps your vengeance might serve us both. The leader of the despicable brood runs free in these depths – an unrepentant murderer still, well suited to this pitiful darkness.'

Gutter's eyes narrowed at the implication.

'You may choose to leave this place, of course. The corridor outside only has two paths, and both are open to you.' Gutter thought she detected the hint of mirth in the woman's voice. 'But somehow, I do not think I have misjudged you, or the violence in your heart.'

The Inquisitor smoothly stepped backwards, feet taking her to the cell door. Reaching the threshold, she paused to throw her torch onto the hard-stone floor, the brazier landing in a shower of embers. 'Do not disappoint me, Gutter. I offer you what little resurrection might remain to one such as you are. Demonstrate your penitence in the last, and salvation might await after all.'

The Inquisitor faded into the darkness beyond, leaving Gutter alone. The cell door hung wide open, illuminated by the soft flame.

Gutter didn't move at first, pulse racing as she replayed the woman's final words. She felt a familiar warmth spreading through her belly, a raw and visceral wrath rapidly rising through her.

A vicious grin broke out over her face.

‘The Svantelit curse you, and your precious faith!’ She leapt to her feet and snatched up the torch, swift strides taking her into the corridor outside.

The same grey and brown brickwork awaited her, stained green around her ankles. A chill breeze ran through the corridor from the right, forcing the light to flicker and wane for a moment, and turning to face that direction she saw the ground level slowly ascending. A glance to the left confirmed the opposite, the inky blackness appearing to absorb the light around it, the ground sloping away into the depths. A long knife lay on the mottled floor in that direction, the metal dulled and spotted with rust.

The demand upon her was clear.

Gutter turned her head once more to the right, facing the cool air. She closed her eyes as it caressed her skin, savouring the sensation. One deep breath felt like the promise of rebirth, a return to a world of colours beyond, escape from her violent past and from the demons which ruled her.

Precious freedom from prisons at last, denied her all these years.

She kept her eyelids shut tight and turned her head back, until she knew she was facing the darkest path. The barbaric knife awaited her hand, the first image to focus when she opened her eyes. The sharp edge glittered in the low light, betraying naught but malicious intent.

The moment had passed.

'I am become Lady Death, Rage. And now I come to end your blight once and for all.'

Gutter turned her back on freedom, committing herself to the bleak and colourless darkness once more.

VENGEANCE

The trio scurried through the darkness, Rage leading the way. The lantern shook crazily in his grip, casting a wild storm of cascading light and shadows over the uneven walls. No words passed between the figures, the only sounds their hurried breathing and the crunch of dirt under their boots.

The tunnel so narrow as to only permit single file, Decimate followed second in line, Harry behind her. She stared intently at Rage's bare back. Neither poor light nor a layer of sweat and grime could hide the long white stripes criss-crossing over his flesh, brutal scars no doubt inflicted by the lash. They looked old, long since healed, and she wondered how he'd earned them.

It couldn't have been a crime worse than the theft of the captain's mantle.

Ahead of her Rage began to slow, panting and wheezing like a horse led to pasture. Decimate matched his reduced gait, intently listening for the sound of pursuit. They were fleeing from a party of soldiers in mismatched colours and armour, a group so motley it offended her she hadn't been able to run each through for their affront.

Her lack of blade at least dulled the outrage.

After a moment, she was satisfied the only sound was Rage's laboured breathing, his heavy frame bent over double to match the hands holding his knees. Once she might have worn concern, but this time

only scorn graced her features. Decimate was done with her captain and his vision of the Union. If she had been determined to seek refuge before, now her resolve was heightened even more so.

Not for the first time, she eyed the long halberd blade in his hands. Rage had broken the weapon's haft over one knee to turn it into an axe of sorts, but she still would have wagered the crescent blade was neigh on worthless in a duel. The metal was far too heavy for the short length of grip, and the long point would make slashing near impossible in these confines.

It was a badge of leadership regardless, a symbol of power offering an upper hand between them.

Rage sensed her stare and stood, grinning as she hurriedly averted her gaze. Words were unnecessary; both knew either would abandon this alliance the moment they could survive on their own. For now, there was at least safety in numbers. Decimate only hoped the end didn't lie in bloodshed when that was no longer true.

He brazenly turned his back to her and stalked away, almost daring her to try and attack him. She had no choice but to follow.

Decimate glanced sideways at Harry, searching for a sign he shared her predicament. She might as well not have bothered. The Hat wore a nonchalant expression as he shrugged shoulders broad enough to barely fit between the narrow walls.

She grumbled a curse under her breath. The

apathetic response was typical of the lax attitude of the big man. At least he hadn't paired the movement with the infuriatingly idiotic grin he usually wore. Of all the Union Harry was the one she knew least, including the monster. He had never been part of Blackheart's crew, only joining their band once Rage took control; even then the Hat had spent far more time on the field with the Alchemists and Engineers than with the rest of the Union.

The premium Rage had reputedly demanded for Harry's services was outlandish, and an affront to every other player in the Union. Decimate cared little for either Guild, finding their players obnoxious and egotistical, but she did find offence in the fees. Why should Harry be worth more than the rest of them? Everything about the man was a mystery, a complete unknown.

His performance on the pitch was hopelessly erratic, besides. In the early days he had been subject to great bouts of rage, furiously attacking the opposition with his oversized wrench, but that time had passed. Ever since the Mortician in the leather jacket had beaten the tar out of Harry with his bat, the big man looked bewildered more often than not, slow to anger as friendly players dodged past him.

He would be no ally to Decimate in these bleak depths, and Rage knew it.

It felt like they had been wandering the endless corridors of this wretched place for days. Decimate's throat was impossibly dry, her stomach cramped and aching. One hand had snaked its way into her tunic some time back and lived there ever since, pressing on her stomach to lessen the pain. It didn't work particularly well. Hunger was constantly nagging at her, an unabating hollowness leaving her lightheaded.

At least she seemed to be faring better than Rage, who had deteriorated rapidly over the last hours. Huddled over like an old man, he still led the three of them at the front, trembling hand holding the lantern out in front of him. As he walked he muttered to himself, holding his mouth into his shoulder. Decimate couldn't hear the exact words, only a garbled stream of what sounded like cursing.

She was more concerned about their light source. As soon as it was exhausted they would be lost in the pitch black, destined only for death – and given the passage of time since Rage freed Harry and Decimate alone, the candle had to be near the end of the wick already.

Rage stopped suddenly, frantically staring about the gloom. 'Where? Where!?' His voice was the rant of a madman, no trace of sanity therein. 'I see your Talons, Pirate King! Did you truly think you could so easily ensnare me into your shadow!?'

It was the third such outburst so far and no less alarming for it. She barely had time to react before Rage snarled and ducked into a hidden alcove, plunging his

companions into the very darkness Decimate feared.

She leapt for where he had disappeared from sight, fumbling along the wall as Rage's voice echoed around her, amplified into a monstrous cacophony fit for the tongue of a devil. Decimate had to follow, despite her misgivings. The only alternative to keeping in the light was suicide.

Chasing down the tunnel she felt the footing grow firmer as the grainy dirt gave way to stone paving, the rocky walls becoming irregular brick once again. The change left her legs aching with each hard impact as she ran, trying to catch her insane leader and his fevered burst of speed. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the faint rumble of water over the rasp of her breathing and the sound of Harry lumbering along in her wake. It steadily grew louder, the exact proximity impossible to know.

She rounded a sharp corner in her path and almost immediately collided with Rage, who had halted dead in his tracks. Mouth open to offer a spiteful curse, she stopped, jaw slack at the vision before her.

The tunnel widened and ended abruptly after a few more feet, opening into a wide crevasse. Moonlight flooded downwards from where the ground had broken above, torn asunder by a violent tremor which had sunk down to sever the pathway and created two opposite rock faces. On the other side of where they stood a torrent of water cascaded downwards, spilling from some unknown source above and showering

noisily over jagged rocks far below.

Decimate's eyes strained as she looked for handhold along the ravine walls and found only treachery waiting. She could see a round circle of shattered brickwork opposite, the other side of their tunnel some twenty feet away at least; shattered masonry below gave hint of what happened to the rest between. The gap was definitely too far to jump, even on fresh legs that weren't numb from the chase.

It was obvious they had reached impasse in this direction.

She could have laughed at the absurdity of their situation. Until mere moments ago she had been concerned for the lack of illumination – now they had natural light and even the promise of freedom, only to have to turn back and return to the black depths.

Next to her Rage stared ahead motionlessly, the lantern discarded at his feet mere inches from the edge. Decimate kicked it back to safety, daring a tug on his sleeve.

The mad bastard didn't react at all, either ignoring her or lost to a stupefied daze.

Decimate didn't care which. Stooping to collect the light source, she turned her back on him at last. He could die out here for all she cared. Now was the time that he had outlived his usefulness. She took one last look at the rocky walls, desperate to find anything to stop her from returning into the catacombs.

For as far as she could see they only offered a blank

expanse of sheer rock. Climbing would be impossible, even if she waited out here on the ledge with Rage until the first light of dawn.

'Coming?' Her words hurt from how dry her throat was. Harry nodded. Apparently, he shared her desire to abandon the man who had been the cause of their imprisonment.

Decimate led him back into the tunnel, casting a worried look at the low light as they turned the corner. Inside the lantern was worse than she feared, the wick balancing on a glossy pool of melted wax and waning dangerously.

They only made five paces. Unable to tear her eyes away from the pathetic lick of flame, Decimate watched helplessly as it flickered out altogether, their only hope of escape dying with it.

Panic claimed her, as raw and visceral as waking to a thug's knife at her throat. Pulse racing, her mind screamed words that didn't reach her mouth, curses mixed with wild terror. She felt herself fall to her knees, one hand groping for the wall to support herself in the darkness.

They were doomed.

Harry snagged at her coat and she batted his clumsy fingers away, raising her head to protest before being struck mute yet again. Dumbfounded, she could only watch as a faint light in the distance weaved crazily back and forth, steadily growing larger as it approached them. The steady sound of running footsteps began to

echo along the walls.

'Gutter.' Harry saw the identity of the new arrival first.

Hair swept back to reveal her face, the Broken Princess' features were illuminated to horrific effect, her snarl a rictus death mask and eyes deep hollows of malicious intent. Decimate had never seen the unhinged woman so determined, some greater purpose driving her legs relentlessly forward.

The reason came to her almost immediately.

Rage.

Choking back rising bile she turned blindly, fear lifting the great numbness afflicting her feet. She heard Harry blundering his way behind her, his size and lack of agility forcing him to move slowly through the narrow passage. Decimate skidded around the tight corner, natural light seeping back into the world. Seconds later Harry lumbered into sight, the big man offering a her a terrified look.

Suddenly it was too late, and Gutter was upon them. Like a shrieking dervish she launched herself forward into the light, her howl deafening.

The Hat shoved Decimate away hard and she tripped on unsteady legs, falling to the dusty ground with a jolt. One hand trailed dangerously close to the open ledge and she quickly snatched it back, other hand scrabbling for a handhold to pull herself back to safety.

She returned her eyes to the altercation in time to witness Gutter plunge a long knife into Harry's belly, right up to the hilt. The large man grunted and

folded over, shirt rapidly staining deep crimson as he bled out. Gutter tore the blade from his body with an enraged screech, arcs of blood painting the walls as she swatted Harry's outstretched hand away and stabbed him again.

The metal cut into his soft flesh with ease once more, and the Hat dropped to one knee as Gutter ripped her weapon free. Face twisted in pain, his lips parted, about to croak words through a mouthful of blood before Gutter delivered a powerful kick to his chest.

Harry disappeared over the edge, plummeting towards the rocks below.

Decimate felt her eyes widen in shock.

Looking over the side she saw Harry land heavily, impact clearly breaking his body open under his clothes, an explosion of red staining his chest. His corpse lay still, one side of his head caved in from where he struck the unforgiving stone. With morbid finality, his top hat toppled into the rushing water and was carried away on the current.

Decimate returned her gaze to Gutter, her body unable to stop trembling.

Vengeance yet unclaimed, the Broken Princess stalked forward with murderous intent. Her ragged and unkempt hair wildly trailed through a breeze that suddenly swept in from the opening, lending her a feral appearance to match the cold hatred burning in her eyes. Pale skin taut over lean muscle and cast in silvery moonlight, the woman looked every inch

the avenging spirit come to life from the pages of old tomes and faerietale.

Rage's bloody legacy was upon him at last.

Their captain had shaken his stupor, the scent of death dragging him back from whatever brink he teetered upon. His expression was hardened into a frown, but Decimate detected a hint of amusement still hiding in the dangerous bastard. He gripped his makeshift weapon in both hands and leant forward in a fighting stance.

'Very good, girl. But old Harry was unarmed. Can you do the same to a man with a blade?' His lips sneered the words with condescending disdain, eyebrows raised at some joke only he understood.

Gutter remained unfazed, staring him down. Decimate saw the shorter woman's leading leg tense, and suddenly she was on the attack, blade piercing the air. Rage parried, cold steel meeting in high-pitched union. He ducked a second swipe of the knife and lowered his shoulder, barging Gutter backwards and stepping away from the edge himself.

Rage drove a hard knee into her stomach before she could counter-attack, his fingers roughly grabbing a fistful of hair and wrenching her head back. Gutter flailed off balance for a second, before her head was smashed into the wall.

'You've never truly understood, have you? Just another wilting flower caught up in the games of the Pirate King. You're no killer, just a mummer playing at

games beyond you.' Rage chuckled, little more than a sinister rattle. 'The gift of death is mine to give, and I do not share with those underserving. You cannot take it from me!'

Still holding her hair tight, he heaved her away with one hand. Gutter staggered and fell, before twisting her body and pushing herself up again. Rage backed away, all trace of merriment passed.

'This is your avenging angel, Blackheart? This miserable whelp?' He was struggling again, forehead furrowed in concentration, one eye twitching. 'Be silent! Cease your incessant chatter, carrion bastard!' He roared each word, his voice torn viscerally from his throat rather than spoken.

Gutter didn't waste time trying to comprehend his actions, feinting a kick to the knee before lunging at his exposed torso with her knife. Distracted, Rage fell for the ruse, only barely able to block the strike. His right arm failed backwards, launching his weapon into the unknown.

He retaliated with an offhand punch, a wild haymaker which sailed through empty air and earned him a straight-armed jab to the jaw. The blow unbalanced Rage, and he dropped to his knees.

Gutter glared at him, her eyes glittering triumphantly. 'I am Lady Death, Rage. Welcome to my embrace!'

The murderous thug before her stared back with eyes unfocussed, his breathing heavy. 'I will survive this eternal night. Those scars prove nothing, only

your empty lies!' Rage spat his reply in a shower of phlegm.

Decimate doubted his words were for the Broken Princess.

The knife reflected the cold light as it swept downwards, aimed for the throat. Rage caught the blade in his fist at the last moment, blood blossoming between his fingers as Gutter pressed her weight down, cutting deeper. It was a deadly test of strength, Rage holding one white knuckled hand over the other, Gutter's expression fixed in a baleful stare and her teeth bared.

They were on the very edge, Rage's knees edging backwards and his heels hanging over open space. He snarled defiantly even as his ruined hands shook, his wrists painted rich red. Decimate realised she was holding her breath, unable to release it until this final act was resolved. The world had shrunk to the two combatants struggling before her.

The Broken Princess braced herself and pressed down harder. She was already the victor here, on the threshold of claiming her vengeance.

Rage smiled. One last, terrible grin that could have meant anything.

Gutter's eyes widened in recognition.

And then the Usurper was gone.

Gutter almost launched herself with him, suddenly collapsing forwards from the lack of resistance. She managed to fight her way clear, muscles knotted as she

strained to find purchase.

Life flooded back into the world in a rasping breath, and Decimate found herself standing on uncertain feet. She cast a sideways glance at Gutter, the other woman panting from exertion now her wild fury had been thrown into the abyss alongside Rage.

An eerie silence settled over the scene.

Eventually, Decimate could bear it no longer. She opened her mouth to form some sort of plea, but Gutter waved her down. 'Death is no easy matter, Svetla. I have no quarrel with you.' She spoke in their native Erskirii, the words as familiar as the shortening of Decimate's name. 'Leave, before the Inquisitors find you here.'

Nodding, Decimate walked to the edge. There was no sign of Rage, only a second bloodstain on the rocks below, near to where Harry lay. The light had begun to grow brighter, a new dawn rising far above.

Decimate realised she didn't know what was to follow for any of them now. Those fortunate enough to have broken free from the Inquisition's shackles would have to make their own way in the world once more. Her mind cycled through the faces of her fallen comrades, remembering each of them. She surprised herself by shedding a tear, a single line of sorrow which she quickly wiped into oblivion.

There could be no return from this. The brotherhood of the Union had met ruin in a frenzy of bloodshed and vengeance at last, ironically accomplishing the

very task the Inquisitors had started. Rage's death on the rocks below was the final nail in their coffin, the passing of the bloody throne without heir.

It was over.

The Union had been brought to its knees, and now existed only in chains.

— NOBILITY REBORN —

Decimate could feel frost touch her flesh in spite of the brazier's warmth, ice creeping into her bones from the harsh and unforgiving landscape. She swore in Erskirii and pulled her jacket closer. Mald had ever been a cold place, even during the summer. In wintertime, a man could quickly freeze to death if he were caught outside overnight.

She had realised by now her folly in travelling to these frozen highlands. Rooted in the forlorn hope of a restored place within the Brewer's Guild, the journey north had left her more isolated than ever. The land was sparsely populated outside of the cities, and Decimate had no friends here. She spent most days miserable and half frozen, bedding down in dilapidated and empty taverns once the night drew in. Standing on the veranda of such a place now she was as utterly alone as every evening, the silence unbroken but for the gentle creak of the alehouse sign on the wind.

Her nights in such squalid hovels were at an end in any case, the purse at her belt nearly empty. She didn't need to count the handful of copper and silver pieces remaining to know their meagre value. Unable to pay her way, she would need to steal her way onto a ship heading back to the mainland in the morning.

The Exile spat in frustration, watching the phlegm freeze on the hard ground below. After that? Only the roads beckoned her, poverty and death suspended

over them like a terrible storm cloud.

Another figure stepped out onto the veranda with her, heavy boots announcing his arrival. For all that he was barrel chested and broad, the Grand Brewer's aura filled the space more than his intimidating presence, his unexpected appearance taking Decimate aback.

'What happened to your mask?' His gruff voice cut unapologetically through the silence.

Decimate felt herself blush, her cheeks growing warmer. A token of her resolve to leave the Union behind her, she had left her mask in the labyrinth - only to discover how conscious she remained of the scarring over her left eye. Even now she hid the old wound behind strands of hair.

She forced a nonchalant shrug. 'Easier to travel this way.'

Tapper nodded, his face not showing whether he believed her or even cared at all. 'You're some long way from home, lass. Rumour is you're here to parley with us.'

Decimate didn't reply at first, searching for the right words. Before she found them, he continued.

'I heard about the bad blood between your kind and the church. We live in unforgiving times, but I'm not so hard as that.' He unclipped a leather flask from his hip and held it in her direction. 'I've never much cared for clever words mind, so I'll speak straight. I expect no less from you.'

He was offering her a black flag, a hand extended in truce.

It was more than she could have hoped for. She had never been one for whisky, but eagerly took a

mouthful. The moisture felt good in her throat, the warmth in her belly a blessing.

Tapper nodded in acceptance. 'Are you tired of running, Exile? Searching for a hearth instead?'

She handed back the flask, wiping her fingers across lips turned numb. 'Maybe. Although, I'm not sure that yours suits me. I heard you were weak.' She held her breath. Her words had been a gamble, a risk which sat ill with her precarious position.

The Grand Brewer chuckled. 'I like a strong lass with fire in her belly. Aye, I face a challenge. But we're not talking about me, Exile. I can offer you haven once more. Under my wing you can be returned to the fold.' His eyes fixed her in a hard stare. 'All I ask in return is your loyalty.'

Decimate carefully looked for a trace of treachery, the tell-tale hint of a smirk or an errant blink. After so long amongst the dregs of the world she was all too wary of the signs, deeply untrusting of the intentions of those who would offer her fellowship.

Tapper only returned honesty, his gaze stern but fair.

He offered her the flask of Old Jake's once more. Decimate hesitated for only a second longer before accepting, this time taking a much longer draught with another meaning entirely.

— BLOODY SUNSET —

Gutter sat on a bench overlooking the harbour, the docks below as quiet and still as the placid sea beyond. Winter had muted the landscape for as far as could be seen. Large chunks of snow slowly drifted downwards, each flake fluffy and impossibly white against the grey backdrop, even the setting sun unable to penetrate the stony cold.

She didn't know how long she had sat here, aimlessly watching. Some hours if she had to guess, just staring at the sun as it fell from the sky. Soaked through, she ignored how her pale skin shivered against the settling frost, the same numbness which had taken root in her heart come to eclipse the rest of her. The death of Rage was supposed to have lifted some great burden; in truth, it had become a noose around her neck. With her final murder, the faces and voices of all her other victims had swum into focus, condemning what her life had become.

The freedom she had dreamt of for years tasted like ashes, pitiful and bitter, no escape at all.

Ox didn't try to hide his approach, his broad and muscular body as ill-suited to sneaking around as his hard demeanour. Gutter simply offered him a nod when he joined her, without turning to face him.

'I was captured by them, before you. I don't envy what you went through in those depths. I know all too well of the torment.' His voice was strangely calm,

in spite of his brutish appearance. The tone of a man offering her sympathy.

Gutter didn't return his kindness, hers long lost. 'Do you, Master Butcher? I doubt we share the same scars.' There was no way he could have known the brutal horrors of her escape.

He ignored her contemptuous tone. 'The bastards couldn't break me, and I grew stronger for that. The cage taught me to find myself again - who I really was, the forgotten man from years past. Stripped away the shell of bullshit surrounding me.' Ox paused, the next words difficult for him. 'But I only made it because I had someone on the outside. My mark was still stamped on the world, no matter how they tried to tear me from it.'

She turned to study at him, his face glowing umber from the sunset. He met her gaze and continued. 'I know you didn't have that luxury. What you had to do, you did alone. I doubt anyone will pay you respect enough for that feat.'

Gutter desperately tried to keep the sorrow from her face. In spite of her flinty reserve, the Master Butcher had struck a chord within her. Mentally, she willed away the tears beginning to form at the edges of her eyes.

His eyes bored into hers, unflinching and relentless. 'Time enough has passed with you on your own, I reckon. There is a kindred spirit in you, Gutter. The soul of a ruthless and bloodthirsty killer, crafted by the Pirate King and sharpened to a lethal edge by your hatred for the traitor.'

She averted her gaze, pulling her head away from his fierce glare. Down below, a crew were preparing to set sail, and Gutter stared at the tiny figures enviously. Their carefree world appeared to within touch of her fingertips, yet in reality was nigh on impossible to reach, kept from her by invisible bars. She considered the Master Butcher's words. Maybe she was little more than a heartless murderer now. Trying to hold onto an ideal of the girl she had once been seemed futile.

A figure she didn't recognise stepped boldly into sight, waiting a respectful distance away. Gutter looked sideways at him, eyes drawn to the long knives and whetstone at his belt. He clearly didn't intend to draw one of them and attack, thick arms crossed over his chest. Older than her, he wore maturity well, temples peppered grey. It lent authority to his demeanour, the same intimidating aura of command she saw in Ox or the Grand Brewer.

The Master Butcher nodded in greeting before turning his attention back to her. 'The time for preamble is spent, Gutter. I must depart, and I would take you with me; the only question now remains with you. Are you ready to join us? Come home to your true kin?'

Gutter paused before answering. Looking at the knives adorning Ox's companion, she could easily imagine the likely consequences of turning the Master Butcher down, but that didn't matter. It simply wasn't an eventuality she cared to entertain. Mentally she bid a final farewell to her past.

On the horizon, the sun finally fell. It left a crimson stain in the skies, coloured in deadly vibrancy yet utterly bereft of warmth. The vicious woman cast by its ruddy shade nodded in acceptance, a forsaken and broken princess no more.

INHERITOR

Harriet rushed into her rooms, arms full of scrolls and tomes stacked far past her head. Long apprentice robes tangled around her legs, she nearly tripped over in her haste, and for a handful of seconds she danced an embarrassing jig trying not to lose her balance. It was no use; by the time she stopped moving she had dropped most of her burden anyhow, the floor around her covered in dusty parchment papers and heavy books.

Sighing, she carefully set down the meagre pile of reading material still pressed to her chest, and looked around mournfully. Open books stared back at her, their pages folded and torn, or wearing a boot footprint. Harriet found herself fighting back tears. This would no doubt earn her the ire of her tutors, let alone the fearsome chief librarian. Their disappointed faces and words of condemnation came to mind all too easily, familiar from the trouble she'd gotten herself into in the past.

She lost the uneven battle and launched herself onto her bunk, wet eyes streaming. She was likely facing expulsion regardless. The College of Artificers had rejected her final paper twice already; a third time would be unheard of. Even if she did manage to pass this semester, the junior classes were already pointing and laughing behind her back. It was humiliating.

Things would probably be best if she just snuck out one night and never looked back. At least that might spare her the long walk of shame towards the school

gates, cruel heckling following each step.

The sun had begun to set by the time she had composed herself, the tall hat on her bedside table casting a long shadow into the room. Truthfully, Harriet didn't know why she had picked it up from the flea market down in Addicts Alley, or even why she had gone to such a notorious location in the first place. Such bold behaviour was completely unlike her, better suited to the daring and extroverted girls in her classes than nervous little Harriet.

The young Engineer barely had the purse for such frivolous spending, but thinking back she was sure the old hag at the stall hadn't charged her much. She vaguely recalled a pair of grubby hands thrusting the hat towards her all too well, but no part of haggling over the price.

Harriet rolled over to consider the strange headwear.

It was quite unlike anything she'd seen before, in the style once worn by pompous old gentlemen, but all proportions exaggerated. The brim was too wide and the trunk projected up into the air comically, flaring outwards like a trumpet. The material seemed to be stitched together from multiple sources, a patchwork of messy fabric that didn't match in the slightest.

Her nose winkled. From the damp smell, clearly it had been for a swim, too.

She snickered, despite her foul mood. What would the other girls say if she turned up to class wearing such a silly thing? One hand snagged the hat as she rose from her cot, padding over to a tall mirror set in the corner.

The hat in her hands seemed even more extravagant in the distorted glass, far larger than life. It tingled to the touch, warm from sitting in the sun all day.

Grinning impishly, she took hold of the thick brim in both hands and pulled it on, over her head.

'Harriet? Harriet!?' Answer me at once if you're hiding in there!' The voice came from the other side of the door, accompanied by the loud drum of bare knuckles on wood. Without waiting, the owner of both rudely swept into the room, pausing on sight of the sprawling mess covering the floor.

'What on earth do you think you've done, young lady?!' The chief librarian's face had turned purple, glasses slipping rapidly down her patrician nose, veins standing out against pale skin at her temples.

'Young lady?' Harriet looked down at herself before returning the older woman's stare. 'Why, I suppose I am at that.' She twisted her shoulders, marvelling at how narrow they were. 'Such novelty! I must admit haven't been this short for quite some time - I'd fair forgotten how close the ground really is.'

The librarian looked at her quizzically. 'What are you babbling about?'

A wide grin crept over Harriet's face. 'Don't worry, old girl. It would take far too long to explain. You could be a charmer though and tell the dean that I'll be clearing out later today - after all, the Hat must step where she must, and where her inclination may take her.'

Exasperated, the librarian threw up her arms and

stalked away.

The young Engineer looked at herself in the mirror. 'Well, Harry, it looks like you're back once more. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Think I'll even take the name myself, if you don't mind.'

— THE UNBINDING —

The two men walked slowly through the blackened ruins, their footsteps breaking through the silence as they crushed extinguished embers underfoot. Once this had been Union land, a place none beyond that treacherous brotherhood would have dared to tread. Through fear of bloody reprisal, the outlaws had held this place for as long as either man could remember, the word of tyrants become the law in this dank and shadowy corner of the world.

That myth had been proved false overnight. The Union had never wielded true power, only the semblance of it. When the eye of the Solthecian order fell upon them at last and the Inquisitors came, torches in hand, flames revealed the promise of retribution against trespassers for the lie it always had been.

For the first time in their lives, Avarisse and Greede shared a moment of uncharacteristic reverence as they stood side by side and surveyed the destruction. Not a trace of life remained throughout, every surface and piece of furniture hopelessly charred. The structure little more than a skeletal frame, the hideout had become a morbid monument to the ruination of the Union.

‘Just us left then, from the old firm.’ Avarisse was the first to speak.

‘It would appear so, Mssr Avarisse. Your insights remain as sharp as your wit, and dashing smile.’ Greede flashed his colleague a dark humoured grin of his own

before continuing. 'I suppose the question now should be whether we are to claim punitive vengeance on behalf of our fallen brothers and sisters, or to forgo that particular sentiment entirely.'

Avarisse kicked a chair lying on the ground beside him, barely more than a burnt silhouette, watching as it exploded into charcoal. The lumps of cinder and dust were unrecognisable from what they had once been, with no hope of ever returning to their previous state.

'Don't much feel like it. Never liked most of 'em anyways.' He snorted. 'Besides, there's enough scratch in my pockets for me not to care, even if it were my old dam that burnt to death in this shithole.' He patted his coat, feeling the satisfying bulge of gold coins.

Greede raised an eyebrow. 'I was unaware we had made such a lucrative arrangement with any of our principles in recent times, Mssr Avarisse. Do be so good as to share the wealth, as the common man in the street might say.'

'You didn't make any arrangement, little man. I did, for myself. The penny finally dropped, and the bag of gold in my pocket tells me where I'm headed. Don't know about you.'

'A lone enterprise? Are you suggesting... we go it alone?' A quaver in Greede's voice betrayed uncharacteristic nervousness. 'I am hesitant to entertain the thought of parting ways. After all, old soldiers must stand shoulder to shoulder until the end, comrades forevermore, if you care to remember

the creed of the old Raedlanders.’

‘We were never them, though.’ Avarisse wasn’t nearly so naïve to believe the manipulative dwarf’s plea. Everything Greede said was carefully calculated, spoken only in order to further his own agenda.

Greede sighed by way of reply, sullenly staring at the setting sun through a gap in a broken-down wall, the burnt wood lit bronze by the light.

A strange sense of vulnerability settled over the scene, as each man contemplated their future. Neither had ever tried to make their way in the world without the other, the dissolution of their partnership offering something completely unknown.

‘Enough of this bull.’ Avarisse was fast growing tired of waiting. ‘I probably owe you enough to dice for it at least. Didn’t you have a set somewhere?’

‘Alas, I fear my favoured possessions resided in the corner yonder, more is the pity.’ The smaller man pointed to a bare stretch of blackened stone, bitter winter wind having swept away any ashes remaining from his lost effects.

‘Hmm. Shame. Good dice they were, engraved ivory.’ Avarisse caught himself smiling wistfully. ‘Didn’t you steal them from the old friar on Thrift Street? I remember you pocketing them whilst I dug the hole to throw the silly bastard in.’

‘Mssr Avarisse, you do have such a worryingly eidetic memory.’ Greede grinned. ‘So, that leaves us stone, parchment, knives then?’

Avarisse sniffed. 'Haven't played that since I was a lad.' 'How fortuitous a statement!' Greede was playing a pantomime for his own benefit. 'I even believe such a game was how we first decided to begin our joint venture. Now I think of it, it occurs to be even more appropriate than I first thought!'

'Whatever. I'm tired of this already. Just get on with it.'

Greede's smile turned bittersweet, his expression softening. 'Why, Mssr Avarisse, I would have expected at least a hint of theatrical flourish from you. We stand now at the precipice, and speak of a momentous unbinding of fates!'

Avarisse didn't rise to the bait.

The smaller man took the hint and hurried on. 'Very well, then. Let us proceed. If you win, we shall go our separate ways.'

His words were bold, but Avarisse had to force himself to stifle a dry chuckle. Neither man was under any illusion Greede would likely survive on his own, so varied and far ranging were the enemies he'd made over the years. The dissolution of their partnership was a death sentence.

Greede continued, unabashed. 'But if I win, then our partnership is unbroken.' At this, his gaze strayed greedily towards the outline of Avarisse's coat pocket, and the promise contained therein.

Avarisse eyed his colleague warily. It was well known that Greede cheated at all games. Already the grin plastered over the dwarf's face had begun to slip away,

replaced by a sneer to match the vicious and manipulative thoughts no doubt coursing through his mind.

He gave up worrying about it and shrugged. 'On three, then.' In the worst instance, he'd have to murder his old friend and leave the body somewhere.

That was fine. No one would miss the little bastard.

With purposeful threat, he held out a fist, his huge mitt dwarfing Greede's tiny hand. Greede at least had the decency to look suddenly nervous. Avarisse offered a threatening smile of his own in reply. Through the hole in the wall the sun dipped behind the horizon, heralding the end of a long day at last.

'One, two... three!'

THE FERRYMAN'S PUPPET

The scent of incense hung in the humid air, smoky clouds obscuring the ceiling and staining the marbled surfaces shadowy grey. The heat in Scalpel's chambers had grown oppressive since the start of the ritual, both women stripped to thin cloth yet still wearing a layer of sweat over their skin. The ritual chalk Hemlocke had generously daubed over her face and chest had long since dried and flaked away to nothingness, crushed to dust underfoot.

Unfortunate souls surrounded them on all sides, hideous spirits stripped of their human likeness and trapped in this cage of cold stone. They appeared as skeletal wraiths with hollow skulls for faces, crawling and writhing, their forms twisted and convoluted as they silently danced in tormented agony. Above them the aether circled like the current of an awaiting storm.

Hemlocke had been unfamiliar with the blood rites of the Spirit Weavers, but the practice came naturally to one with as close an affinity to the primordial world as she. Communing with the dead was simplicity itself when compared to the intricacies of the Old Ones, the messages of mortals far less cryptic.

Alone amongst the Morticians, Hemlocke had once been unafraid to call Spirit Weaving by the true name for such an art, immediately recognising the practice as little more than enslavement. Yet, as with all things,

power corrupted. It had not been long before she herself had fallen, lured by the dark powers at her fingertips. At night, her forsaken masters sent wild and unexpected nightmares to torment her, foreboding dreams her punishment for abandoning the covenant she had once sworn to the Old Ones.

It didn't matter. She had learned to endure. Practising the back arts had allowed her to steal the sacred essence of the gods themselves, turned to her own wicked devices.

Ritual sickle in hand, Hemlocke slowly drew a stripe through her soft flesh, intoning strange and foreign words of power. The souls nearby immediately rushed to the wound, tumbling over each other in their lust for the rich warmth.

The blood seer chuckled to feel them helplessly trapped within her aura.

Angered, they swirled around her in a cascading tide of spiritual energy, struggling against their captivity. Hemlocke inhaled deeply, feeling her veins pulse powerfully as she violently wrenched the remaining life from them, subjugating them to her will.

The practice was extremely dangerous. Even in this controlled environment, she could feel them scratching at her like rats. The resistance of the spirits drew her blood in tiny rents, drops which were consumed in an instant to aid their struggle. It was little wonder that so many Spirit Weavers had been destroyed by this trial. The slightest lapse of concentration promised only death, the practitioner

ravaged by the vengeful dead and left a desiccated husk.

Hemlocke brought her hands together in a clap, stamping her foot and ending the rite. At once, the storm lessened, the remaining souls scattering to the shadows in the corners of the room in what little relief they could still feel. Gorged with power, Hemlocke leered at them. They would be hers in time, their doom inescapable. Grinning widely, she looked to Scalpel, heady and drunk.

Obulus stood opposite instead, in the place of the Spirit Weaver.

His image distorted in the heat, and she recalled his horrific transformation in her last vision, the creeping darkness which had threatened to overcome her. Fear chased any exultation from her body suddenly, a frozen chill wresting her by the neck and driving her to her knees.

Hemlocke was ashamed to admit it was weakness alone which had forced her into this existence. Discarded and broken in the ditch she had chosen to side with the ferryman, in spite of the promise of the gods. She stood now as a mere puppet in the schemes of the devil himself, as weak and helpless as the spirits at her beck and call.

Suddenly sober, she nodded her head in penitence, before collapsing to the ground.

Servant to the ancient and primordial lords no longer, instead Hemlocke had been enslaved just as she did the lost souls at her command, her new master a darker entity than she had ever known before.

— THE LUNAR GLAIVE —

The voices of the old gods came on bitter winds in these wilds, a frozen tide sweeping down from the realms beyond distant mountains. Minx waited in the clearing, heavy cloak pulled close as she listened, sensing the currents as snowflakes fluttered around her. Shrunk down to a lean and wiry frame, her body had yet to grow used to this cold. The vicious chill had held her in its stranglehold for some days now, settled in her bones and radiating outwards to consume her entire being.

The touch of the Moon Goddess was not for the weak.

She felt the gaze of the Winter Queen before she saw sign of her, Skatha's dark presence a creeping shadow at the edge of her vision. For a moment Minx didn't move, chin proud as she paid fealty to the Champion and her divine mistress. Supplication meant death amongst these harsh peoples, their culture unaccepting of any sign of submission. To do so was to become prey and be torn limb from limb.

Eventually the long moment passed, and Skatha came into view. She prowled as she walked, resting on the ball of each bare foot, more akin to a midnight devil than a young woman. The Winter Queen's furred cloak whipped on the winds to reveal pale flesh underneath, her long hair as untamed and feral as her expression.

Minx felt a curious mixture of sorrow and admiration

for the girl. She knew Skatha to be but a vessel for the indomitable presence of the Goddess, her fate to be utterly consumed, discarded as a frozen and lifeless husk once the winter ascension had passed.

It was a miserable fate, but a proud one. Worthy of remembrance long after bones grew cold.

She steeled herself and boldly returned the Champion's stare, their eyes meeting.

A gasp was torn from Minx's lips, the timeless depths contained within more potent a communion with the gods than she had ever experienced before. Her last resistance to the bitter winter was swept away in an instance as the will of the Goddess flooded in like an unstoppable blizzard.

She felt her eyes roll back in her head as a vision assailed her, a fleeting glimpse of a kingdom under the heel of the Moon Goddess, illuminated by her ghostly avatar in the skies. Harsh winds buffeted the landscape and drifts of snow covered all, sapping colour until only dark shades of blue and grey remained. Horrified, she looked around. Carcasses lay in every direction, prey stripped to brittle white bone.

Skatha watched through the aether, eyes that were not her own glowing with a baleful light.

Minx felt judgement weigh upon her soul, every deed considered and weighed, past and future. If she failed this challenge it was likely her bones would rest with those surrounding her. She fought the incomprehensible tide as best she could, her struggles insignificant against the

might of such a primordial creature.

The vision shuddered abruptly as another portent broke through, a magnificent falcon swooping towards her, sharp talons outstretched. A golden glow appeared on the horizon in the bird's wake, painting the harsh blue in amber. Skatha shied away as the first rays of dawn banished the bitter ice and snow, darkness forced to retreat before the encroaching warmth. It enveloped Minx, chasing the rampant frost into oblivion and allowing her to breathe once more.

Through an umber shade she saw the clearing as it was in summer, bright light filtering through the trees to bless the world. The Winter Queen had been replaced by a long spear, haft freshly cut and steel tip unblemished by age. Minx reached trembling fingers to touch it, and a word seared through her mind, emblazoned like the afterimage of the sun.

Scion.

Her eyes returned to the mortal world. Skatha had fled, the only vestige of her hostile presence the biting cold wind.

The weight of ages slipped from Minx's shoulders as she felt acceptance. She offered a weary and near imperceptible nod before quietly withdrawing, to resume her journey to the Oracle of the Moon Goddess once more.

— THE SILENT CURSE —

A tiny speck of darkness against the blinding white sands and bleached rocks, the figure strode endlessly onwards, dragging his feet over the uneven ground. His lonely passage across the anonymous dunes had been utterly alone; his only companions a long trail of footprints left in his wake and the carcasses of creatures long since rotted to clean white bone.

The wintery shroud cast over the rest of the Empire of the Free Cities barely reached the arid deserts of Sultar. The sun beat down unabated during daylight hours, the season only remarkable for increasingly bitter evenings when any trace of warmth was quickly chased from the air. Not even the boldest of outlaws were desperate enough to seek refuge in such an inhospitable landscape.

It made little difference to the man. He was already dead, twice over.

Irrespective of the time of day he continued, only resting when sleep finally claimed him, limbs too heavy from fatigue to continue. Collapsed in a heap of rags, as soon as his exhausted body regained any measure of strength he would unerringly rise once more. By now he could barely feel his booted feet scraping beneath him, irrespective of whether they kicked up piles of sandy grit, or climbed over hard stone. He was a walking corpse, his tanned skin horrifically gaunt.

Such bloody-minded determination would have

been the end of a lesser individual, but he was no ordinary man. In the past, his name alone had made tyrants and kings tremble, his word enough to bring even the mighty Guilds to their knees. Weak flesh and exhausted muscle were as unable to stop his relentless march as the unforgiving climate.

He did not spare the lash, even with his own body. Failure was unacceptable.

In the back of his mind he could hear the voice, faint and indistinct. A constant grumble at the edge of his hearing, the words were barely formed as anything other than incoherent fury. It was easily forgettable.

The Silent Curse.

She awaited him, and he would not deny her a moment longer.

He reached the crest of the rolling dune as the sun began to fall from the sky, tired legs protesting and threatening to give way. Holding one hand up to shield his eyes, the man surveyed the land, grinning when he made out the broken ruins in the shallow below.

Half buried in the sand, the smugglers den looked just as it did in his mind. Bricks faded and chipped from sandstorms framed a shadowed hole in the landscape, sand encroaching over the stone floor inside. Across the top a line of aged wood struggled to keep its shape against the weight of years.

The man smiled and began his decent into the long shadows below. He had reached his destination at last.

Stepping across the threshold and into the inky blackness was akin to falling into a deep void, a place removed from all humanity. The whole world turned to darkness, his lantern was but a single bead of illumination, near lost as the bleak depths threatened to swallow him and leave nary a trace to be found.

Uncowed, the man strode purposefully through the evening hours, his goal finally within grasp.

The depths he plumbed were entirely artificial, brick and wood evidencing some past industry since abandoned. Faint recollection told him much had been constructed by slave labour, the rest by fierce desert bandits. He knew with absolute certainty both sources of labour were entirely absent now.

By death or imprisonment, the Pirate King had made sure of their fates.

Still, they had left behind devious and ingeniously placed traps which he was forced to evade. Blades with vicious edges swung from hidden places to cut the air inches from his face; darts flew from concealed pipes to blunt themselves on walls, only seconds from puncturing his skin and infecting him with the virulent poisons they were no doubt coated in.

Yet, all of these trials did not deter the man. What formidable sense drove him forward also kept him alive, forewarning of when to sprint through dangerous areas, and how to avoid secret tripwires and pressure plates.

Upon encountering the first pitfall the voice had raised in sufficient volume to echo from the walls around him, obnoxious and distracting. He'd silenced it with a cruel smile, savouring the moment the words waned to a sullen whisper. Nothing would come between the man and the destiny awaiting him.

The Silent Curse.

He turned the next corner in the narrow passageway. A rich vein of golden light painted the path ahead, at last revealing the vast cove hidden at the bottom of the bolthole.

Suddenly his limbs were completely enraptured, dragging him forwards at pace. With every step, the longing grew stronger, heart pounding in his chest. Sea air rushed through to replace the stagnant gloom, familiar and welcoming with its embrace. The man barely noticed the narrow wooden frame constructed around the entrance as he squeezed through excitedly, splinters from the aged wood digging into his leathery flesh.

An unusual reverence fell upon him. After so many days absent from the world, he had returned.

Light flooded into the space from the opposite side, daybreak tainting the world in a rich amber glow. It reflected from the water to illuminate the magnificent galleon anchored in the bay from underneath, the darkened wood of the hull cast bronze. The man's breath caught in his throat as he stared, a thousand memories flooding into his mind, none entirely his own.

He knew even the slightest detail about her with unwavering certainty, every mark and burr appearing vividly in his head. Looking at the furled sails he realised he could take ash to parchment to sketch their crossed sabres and skull stitching with perfect recollection, or draw the amorous curves of the hidden figurehead. Grinning, he offered a nod to the morbid remnants of the crew, dry husks in a small alcove a few feet away.

Without command his feet took to motion once more, striding confidently towards the ship.

His boots made quick time over the dusty gangplank leading up the side, until he stood on deck once more. Expression triumphant, he closed his eyes, savouring the sensation of movement beneath his feet and the sound of the red tide below. A faint breeze swept through the cove, caressing his skin like an old lover.

The Silent Curse.

All too readily his mind faded to the spray of salt water, the creak of the sails and masts overhead, the warmth of the sun on the open seas. Darker, more insidious thoughts followed almost as quickly, urgently pressing upon him. His cruel disdain for the defeated captives sobbing below decks; chuckling darkly when a bloody grudge was satisfied amongst the crew. Cannons bellowing deafeningly, accompanied by splintering wood and the screams of men and women as they died in battle.

The colour of his enemies' blood, dark crimson over cold steel.

These memories were not his own, he knew. Yet, they were as much part of him now as the cleaver and the knives at his belt, or the cigar stub nestled between his yellowed teeth. He could barely wait to lift anchor and take once more to the seas.

The Silent Curse was his. His again, or his at last? The man couldn't be sure. He knew enough to not care regardless. He filled his lungs to bursting with a deep draught of sea air, and then opened his eyes.

A different soul looked upon the world than the one who had started this journey.

Alone, he looked across the cove, regarding the emerging dawn.

He would be ruled by Rage no longer. This day had witnessed the rebirth of the Pirate King, come to cast his bloody shadow over the Empire of the Free Cities once more.