

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.

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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 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.