

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.

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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.