

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 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.