

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*

*horribly 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.

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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.

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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.