

# 1-Meditating, Officer

Rainier twirled a slate between his fingers as he lay on the cold floor. It was a ritual he partook in every other night so as to make sure his memories of Emma remained fresh in his head. Sometimes, the oppressive weight of isolation from the *real* world got to him.

He looked up at the ceiling, darkness the only light about it. And within that darkness played various scenes of him and his little sister engaged in Nine Men's Morris every time their parents were at a council meeting.

Despite his wishes, though, there were cracks forming in the scenes. They were fading.

Sucking in air through his teeth, Rainier shut his eyes and tightened his fist, burying the slate within his palm in a choking embrace as though he wanted to crush it.

He recalled returning from the Moat Watch with Emma to the pale faces of their father and mother covered in their very own blood. He recalled the public trial and the Emperor Otis Norville sentencing him to life for a crime he had not committed. He recalled being withheld at Ironhold and the words his uncle and auntie had said to him upon their visit. All of a sudden, he was reminded as to why he despised shutting his eyes at night. Those despicable memories.

Rainier felt a certain urge grow within him. He wanted to cry, shout, and be angry. He'd done that a lot in his first five days in BlackGate. But... Succumbing to his underlying emotions was all just a pointless waste of time. He'd come to realize that sooner rather than later. As clear as day, it was obvious that it wasn't going to help his situation in any way—*any way at all*.

The sound of his heart pounding and his blood rushing flowed into Rainier's ears. They drowned out the annoying squeaks of rats, the faint rustling of the unnervingly close cockroaches, and the hope-shattering waves crashing against the stone walls. It was to the point that he almost didn't notice the rasping against his cell's door.

He opened his eyes, the reflection of an eye peeking into his cell from its door's peephole of bars coming into view.

"What's you still doing awake, 501?"

Rainier looked at his arm which was raised over his head and *tsked*. He put it down, the slate thrown into a pocket he'd, through countless attempts, sewn into his shabby cell tunic.

“Meditating, officer,” he replied.

The guard behind the door scoffed. “Meditating is for nobility; you’re no longer one. So put a cork on that nonsense and go to sleep or I’ll have to beat it into you. And trust me, you don’t want *my* rod connecting with your body.”

Rainier rolled his eyes while he tucked his hands underneath his head. “Yes, sir.”

“If you didn’t like prison then you shouldn’t have murdered your parents... Try acting like 204 for once. Atone; maybe the rest of your life would be a lot easier then.” The guard snorted.

*Maybe you should stop talking instead.*

“Yes, sir.” Rainier had hesitated, but still came around to forcing himself to say it. After all, in hindsight, the guard was right.

Compared to how he’d lived before, his life was hell.

He was unkempt, only had one bath a week, and had begun to shrivel. After his first ten days, his hair had started to itch, lice having blended in with its auburn. Also, the brightness of his dark green eyes had dwindled significantly. He’d noticed it once while staring into his bowl of washing water.

All in all, he’d lost everything charming about himself, only his freckles were left.

Still... Atone? For what, precisely? He had been framed!

Furthermore, he no longer had access to the riches he’d once possessed. Surviving by paying up protection to the Mooney Family was impossible.

His other option was sucking up to the petulant idiots *booned-but-baned* with the role of guards. Needless to say that he wasn’t interested. He would rather make certain of his escape than become a lackey. Much more a lackey to *dregs* who thought they were somewhat important just because they held sticks.

The eye, and the dim light which had made it visible, withdrew then. Darkness completely returned to Rainier’s cell and a rough expression to his face.

*Nonsense!*

It was less than two hours to midnight, which meant that it was light’s out. The guard on patrol duty was doing his rounds in that regard, making sure the inmates were acting as they were meant to: reserving their energy for the labors they would be put to early on the morrow. Gaoler Kieran was always displeased when the inmates were below par during labor hours. And the guards had it hard whenever Gaoler Kieran was displeased.

Rainier, though, didn't care. He hoped that by the time the rest of the inmates were manually ploughing or planting or shoveling shits, he would be at sea, on his way back to Norv.

Forty days was too much of a time behind these walls, and far too long to be away from the only person left who was dear to his heart.

Soon after, he heard the metallic thud and clicking sounds notifying him of the inmate lodge's main gate being locked. He sat upright, waiting for a minute or two to make sure the coast was clear before he made a move.

Rainier took that time to glance at Dorian, his cellmate, inmate 204, who was still sleeping soundly on a crudely made bed of hay across from him.

The elf who was big of body but small of words had won it as a prize from Gaoler Kieran for being the most noble and peaceful inmate in BlackGate. Just like the *nosy* guard had implied, rightfully deserved too. Rainier had never heard the elf so much as speak back to the guards, flare up, or even fight back. Not even when he was being roughed up by the lesser gangs or his fellow elves—those affiliated with the Greenvine Family.

Look, he was even sleeping on time. Such diligence.

Rainier had no idea of the man's history, but honestly, it was a stupid way to live. The prize was not equivalent to the price.

Rising to his feet, Rainier tiptoed to the door of his cell. He chose not to put on the vulgar, decrepit boots he had been given to match his cell tunic for fear of jeopardizing his stealth.

As he unlatched the bolt of the cell door, his actions threw him back without his accord to the short time he'd spent at Ironhold before BlackGate. There, the cells were locked from the outside by the guards. But here, only the main gate was locked. The inmates were given free rein over unlocking and locking their own cells.

It had been this way ever since the prison's inception. Despite being usurpers that had met their waterloo, the first prisoners of BlackGate had once been royalty. The emperor at the time, Ivor Norville, had still wanted to give them the respect they deserved since they would spend the rest of their lives there with no way back to Norv. In the written texts of his monologue, he had called it, "The freedom present in a cage." To prevent sneak-ins and unnecessary deaths though, the latch was located within the cells.

He opened the door slowly, its creaks kept to a minimum as much as possible. Then he took a peek into the wide and dark hallway. Since he could not make out any movements, he accepted that as all the indication he needed.

With a raging heart and a breathing pattern that made him seem more dead than alive, Rainier passed by rats—a couple left dead beneath his feet—and various, quite unpleasant sounds from the other cells. He let his fingers glide against the cold, grimy walls of the hallway, assuming the work of a compass in the darkness enshrouding him.

It was a lot more uphill than he had imagined, but he arrived at the lodge's main gate without problems at the end of it all. He then took out the key he had stolen beforehand from a carefree guard and unlocked it—*gently*.

A couple of tries and inaudible seething was what it had taken, though. Turned out intense practicing did not equate to the real deal being easy.

Once the guard on patrol duty left, there were usually none of the *Irongods* remaining within the walls of the main prison at this time of the night. Regardless, Rainier embraced the darkness and kept to the walls to ensure he sailed smoothly.

As for the cowardice of the rest of the inmates, he really couldn't blame them even if he'd wanted to.

They had read and heard of the notoriety of BlackGate being an inescapable fortress even while they were still suckling on teats. Everyone had. As such, it had grown to be seen as a prophecy, one that could never be tackled.

And besides, the prison had been built specifically to detain them, Boon Wielders. The probability of success was nonexistent. Which was why an attempt at escaping was seen as foolish by most, and gutsy by the rest, considering the aftermath.

Although, that wasn't a prerequisite to giving up.

Maybe the other inmates didn't have loved ones, so they could just sit back and push through it, live the rest of their lives caged like animals. Most of them did deserve it, though. Rainier, on the other hand, did not possess such a liberty.

As long as he was within these walls, BlackGate would surely become escapable one way or the other. If he was lucky, that could be less than an hour away. But luck was the kingpin of farces. Depending on it had a cost—a rather hefty one.

Rainier arrived at the morgue a few minutes later, wincing from the nauseating smell that was swirling about its magically enhanced cold chambers.

*I really hope this will be my first and last time here...* Wrapping his arms around himself, he walked inside.

"You're late," came a gruff voice strained by Mother Nature knew what. "Close the door," the voice added, and Rainier heeded.

It was then that its owner, dressed in a black cloak, appeared from behind a table which Rainier believed to have been the bed for a dead body until a few minutes—or seconds—ago.

A dwarf, he was, by the name Twirlbeard. Squat, muscular, with knitted beards that reached down to his abdomen, and curled, thick eyebrows. He was a Black Cloak; prisoners who'd chosen to involve themselves with the dangerous task of transporting dead bodies to 'the pit' on the other side of BlackGate.

Rainier had used to wonder why he'd never heard of a member of the Black Cloaks trying their shot at escaping. Unlike others, they were able to move beyond the walls. That was until he'd realized that the HedgeBeasts pulling the Reaper's cart had been given one crucial order by Gaoler Kieran: "Rip anyone who tries to flee to shreds."

Rainier kept a stoic gaze. "Had little choice but to wait until the patrol guard left."

Twirlbeard scoffed. "Excuses won't get you out, pretty boy. Fuckin' diligence will. Where's m' weed?"

Rainier dug his hand into his pocket and brought out a pouch he threw at Twirlbeard. The small man leaped, caught it, took a bit of the greenery and chewed on it before nodding. Of course he was going to nod. For it, Rainier had taken on a job for that insensitive weed dealer, Halfman. And it hadn't been a pleasant one.

It turned out a new, little miscreant had temporarily borrowed a pouch full of gold from him in secret. An initiation of his into the Fledgling gang, supposedly. Rainier had made sure the pouch hadn't been permanently borrowed. The Fledgling gang's target on his back, though, got even bigger as a result.

Perhaps he would hold a grudge against this dwarf if he was betrayed at the end of it all. Twirlbeard sealed the pouch and hid it within his cloak. He then strode towards a certain circular opening at the edge of the morgue's wall.

Despite never seeing it before, Rainier knew exactly what it was. The body slide; a section integrated into the morgue to make transporting dead bodies to the Reaper's cart in the BackWalls easier.

Initially, the job had been for BlackGate guards. But when issues consistently arose where the pulling HedgeBeasts occasionally lost their minds, it was decided that the prisoners should take on the job instead. Guards wouldn't be beast food, and prisoners, for taking on such risks, would be granted a bit of special treatment.

Unfortunately for society at large—if BlackGate was even considered part of society—the HedgeBeasts were yet to lose their minds since then and tear into the prisoners.

It was ironic, as though Mother Nature favored the *tried* sinners.

The dwarf looked over his shoulder at Rainier, his forehead wrinkled despite him not frowning. “In here,” he said and jumped into the opening with a grunt. Rainier did not argue and followed behind him.

The flickering lights of the torches on the wall of the morgue went from distant to unnoticeable as he was pulled downward in a disorienting motion. Twisting and turning, he clenched his chin in silence until he was spat out by the body slide betwixt pale and bloated bodies.

Rainier jumped up as soon as that happened, instantly pinching his nose due to the deeply unpleasant smell of rotten eggs mixed with the stench of sewers.

*This is a rather fascinating but abhorrent combination.*

Twirlbeard walked slowly towards him where he was seated on the edge of the cart and threw him a cloth. “Get in and hide yourself, pretty boy.”

Rainier gazed at the cloth for a moment, then at the two HedgeBeasts to the front of the Reaper’s cart.

Like he’d heard, they were silent, large furballs of muscles, horns, and protruding fangs. Their silence though was rumored to not be taken as a weakness; they were beasts with little to no bark but full of bites.

*I wonder what dying to them feels like...*

As Twirlbeard returned to the front of the cart and took his seat on its perch, Rainier steeled his mind and hid within the bodies, pulling the cloth he had been handed over himself. Moments later, the cart began to move.

Even though he’d placed the possibility of his current escape failing, this was the first time he’d come exceptionally close to going beyond BlackGate’s walls. Well, besides that one experience of his in the sewers. All things considered, it was only right that his insides felt like they were going to shoot out of his throat.

The wheels of the cart clattered, he shook, steadied his breathing, taking in as much of the nauseating air around him that was necessary for his heart to function properly.

The only sounds present at first were the howling of winds. Then he heard the breathy huffs of the HedgeBeasts pulling the cart. Then the crackling of fire came upon his ears. He knew at that moment that they had arrived at the only gate in BlackGate. The Maw gate. Twirlbeard began to whistle.

“Halt!” A voice boomed and the cart stopped. Rainier drew in a deep breath. It was the guard on gate duty, he realized. But that did not make his unease any easier.

He had placed a body over himself, so as long as things proceeded as planned he would not be found. But that also meant that he could not make out his surroundings. All he had left to rely on to figure out how the situation was going were his ears.

Twirlbeard’s whistles curtailed to a stop. “How’s it going, *Irondog*? Night’s quite the chilly one, dont’cha think?”

The guard growled. “One of these days I’m going to have your tongue ripped out and fed to them beasts. Or better still, feed your whole body to them.”

Twirlbeard laughed in a suppressed manner. “Irondog’s just a nick, big man. Every inmate calls y’all that. You gonna feed all ‘o us to them beasts? Eh, I doubt. If you do that, you gonna have to shovel your shits yourself, you know? We don’t wanna let your hands get all stinky and dirty now, do we?”

The guard was silent for a moment. “You got weed with you, don’t you?”

Twirlbeard snorted in derision. “What’d you take me for? Some junkie?”

“Hand ‘em over,” the guard pressured.

“Is that like some kind ‘o gate pass? Since when’d big man Kie implement that?”

“Since I told you to shove that middle finger down your asshole, *asshole*,” the guard proposed. “Now hand ‘em over.”

“I’d rather hand over my left nut.”

“I could take them both if I please,” forewarned the guard.

Rainier began to grow anxious. An hour had long passed by now.

He hoped that this escape would go well, but he was not so foolish as to not consider something unprecedented happening. Which was why if anything really was going to, he needed it to be before midnight. Once that hour caught up to him while he was still within BlackGate, and then he got betrayed or found out, he was fucked. And he’d never been one for being fucked.

Twirlbeard laughed at the guard's words. "Then how about I share it with you once I return from my job, eh? I'm running late, as you can see. Got a schedule to keep and sleep to sleep."

"Let me have the weed then. I'll let it lie safe in my pocket until you return."

Twirlbeard groaned. "A sly one, you are. Aren't you, Irondog? Alright. But keep in mind that if anything happens to my share—"

"That a threat?"

"*Pfft*. Hardly. Here you go. Now, can I be on my *merry way*?"

Rainier heaved out an exhale. All was done now. For what it was worth, it seemed like Twirlbeard was keeping to the end of his own bargain. And for that, he was glad, considering how he'd been betrayed a lot during his previous attempts.

Or so he had thought...

The body he had hidden beneath was flung away from him, and at the same time the cloth he had draped over himself. Rainier's heart stopped for a moment there, but his shock was as a byproduct of disappointment rather than being double-crossed.

His face squeezed as the *Irondog* who he had been sold out to by Twirlbeard stood over him. He had a torch in hand, spear in the other, and a glowing red gemstone hanging from his neck. The guard grinned, making the little mustache plastered above his upper lip even more upsetting to see.

"I never thought you would actually go through with escaping, little Duke. I'm impressed. For that, I'll double the amount of shit you're gonna shovel after Solitary Prison." He laughed mockingly.

No matter how many times betrayal came, it still hurt as much as dying. Rainier made up his mind. Twirlbeard would have the honor of being the first person he held a grudge against within this prison. The Fledglings didn't count as they were a gang.

"Clairvoyance, my ass," the dirtbag of a dwarf sneered.

"Told you, Twirly, this skamelar lied about his Boon. There's no such thing as Clairvoyance. If there was, he would have known this was coming. Aren't I right, little Duke?"

Rainier's toes curled onto one another as his muscles tightened.

"Isn't lying about Boons some kind 'o huge offense?"



“Yeah. Wish there was a foolproof way to confirm these things. I’m sure Gaoler Kie will find some way once I file a claim for this fraud though. Should net us quite the sum in return if we’re correct.”

“And if we’re not?”

“Everyone goes on their jolly, jolly way. Easy.”

“Hmm... Whatever. Just hurry up back there. I gotta get a move on. And make sure to keep your promise. You sure she’s a lovely one?”

The waves of Twirlbeard’s voice making their way into Rainier’s ears caused heat to rise beneath his eyelids. But he reined his desires in, convincing himself that there was no point in gouging out the dwarf’s eyeballs here, right now. And besides, this would be like it had never happened soon enough.

“She’s a great one, a’right,” the guard jested while peering down at Rainier. “Didn’t realize you dwarves had a lotta *sex-grit* until she held my nuts with that *catty* look on her face.” He chuckled.

Imagine being covered in the shit smell of dead bodies while being traded for sex with a female inmate. The fact that such was actually happening made Rainier boil even more. But he couldn’t be hasty. He had to be calm.

“Back to our little runaway,” the guard continued. “You know, now that I look at you up close, you’re quite the stunning lad. A night with that gay elf would probably net me about four to five pouches of weed. Right, Twirlydwarf?”

Rainier spat on the guard. The man snickered in return as he placed his spear on the cart and wiped it off his face.

“Before, it was a joke. Now you’ve forced me to consider it. Your fault.”

Rainier relaxed his raging nerves, trying his utmost best to remain coolheaded. And as soon as the guard took hold of the Boon cuff around his waist, he instantly flung himself off the cart, grabbed a hold of the spear, and broke off its head.

“Oho. You’re a feisty one, little Duke,” the guard jeered as Rainier bolted away from the cart.

He knew the man wouldn’t bother spending his strength chasing after him on such a chilly night. The asshole was going to take his time hunting. And besides, it was not like the direction Rainier was running towards led out of the prison.

The guards working at BlackGate were very lazy types, utterly incomparable to the zealous ones at Ironhold. And probably the only reason they did not just let any prisoner escape whenever they tried to was because they needed people to farm, shovel their shit, skin their meat, and so on.

They honestly didn't even need all the prisoners for that. Foiling escape plans was just fun to them. Some ecstasy seemed to come out of it. A minute or so later, Rainier took a detour and snuck into a corner that was covered in complete darkness.

The BackWalls were alien to him, but navigating it hadn't been his priority; his actions had been solely to escape from the Bloodstone the guard had around his neck. Being close to that meant his Boon wouldn't work, and he was not of the mind to find out what would happen to him if he died in the presence of a Bloodstone.

"Damn it!" Rainier spat while panting, his eyes turning golden immediately. "Why is escaping from this shit hole so fucking hard?"

He knew why. He had experienced the same thing nine times already, the latest of his failures marking it ten now. Perhaps that was why he'd now come to understand that escaping as quickly as he had wanted was going to be impossible.

The realization was painful, but growth only happened when one accepted the truth of the situation they were in. Rainier looked up at the starless sky, his gaze falling on the half moon nestled in it. He took in a deep breath and huffed.

It had been a while now since he'd had a smile on his face. He was slowly beginning to feel like he didn't possess such a capability anymore. He had to get out before he completely lost it. For his little sister.

*I won't be long, Emma...*

At that moment a large golden wheel wrought from ten smaller wheels connected by arcs appeared before his eyes. And in its center was an ornate, elegant timepiece with intricate detailing.

He shifted his gaze towards the first two of the smaller wheels to the right of the large wheel.

Unlike the rest of the smaller wheels which had the tones of bare metal, the first wheel was black, the second a dull gold which seemed to be shimmering away into nothingness, and the arc connecting it to the third was halfway filled with a similar golden color.

Without sparing it as much as a thought, Rainier focused on the second wheel. Its dull gold spilled out brightly almost instantaneously, prompting him to take advantage of all

the medical knowledge he'd inherited from his family, and plunge the spearhead in his hand into his neck.

## 2-I Know What I Know

As soon as his eyes shot open, Rainier pulled close the wooden bowl that was resting to the side of his head and retched out a stream of vomit. It was beginning to seem like he would never get used to the unbearable nausea that came with him traveling back in time.

The taste of bile lingered on Rainier's tongue as his gaze shifted from his bowl towards his cellmate. The elf was seated cross legged on his bed of hay with his face buried into a small book. He did not even spare a bit of attention towards his *very obvious* condition. It wasn't like the ex-noble minded though. What bothered him was how the elf managed to use the flickering light of the hallway to read. He would have asked, but he'd done that once already and had gotten no reply.

Rainier took in a deep breath and exhaled rather audibly. He then grabbed his smaller bowl, used a bit of the water he had saved in it to rinse his mouth, and gulped down the rest. *Maybe a bed of hay wouldn't be so bad after all...* He muttered to himself as he fell back onto the cold floor, his body aching; with what he had to do to get the hay though, he wasn't interested. To him it was equivalent to engaging in an act Mother Nature would never forgive.

He took out his slate and repeated his ritual. Only this time his thoughts were not about how the escape he had scheduled for the night would pan out. The long run was his aim now. He could even picture his mother's glowing dark skin and her beautiful face with a proud smile drawn across it. Of course, directed at him for finally recognizing the importance of her 'slow and steady wins the race' gibberish.

Rainier's heart shook at the memory, a chill crawling down his spine. He morosely dragged his hand to his chest and curled to his side, peering into the darkness of the wall before him. It only took a few more seconds after that for his mind to run amok. And a few more to come to an enlightenment regarding his plight. He had been looking at how to escape with tunnel vision, Rainier realized.

At first he'd tried breaking out of BlackGate all on his own. Every attempt of his had failed. He'd then resolved himself to bribery. After all, what better way was there to cajole a person into aiding a stranger without any further strings attached? His father used to say, "Bribery is a sword." Well, experience had taught him otherwise. Bribery was quite fickle. It had no loyalty. Anyone who accepted a bribe could easily accept another at the detriment of the first briber.

Rainier licked his lips, chapped as they were. He needed something more solid. And he had an idea.

Ants in a colony moved as their queen intended. Soldiers moved as their commander intended. The slates used in Nine's Men Morris moved as the players wielding them intended. When two or more people were involved with each other regarding a common goal, the success of that goal was dependent on the relationship between them. The colony ants. The soldiers. The slates. What was the one thing they all shared in common? The answer was simple. Their dependence on a singular individual.

Bribery wasn't going to cut it. If he was going to escape BlackGate, then he couldn't let himself remain at the bottom of the food chain within its walls. He had to become a singular individual that others would risk it all for. Loyalty. That was his next step. That was his only step. Although, he was not so foolish as to not consider its near-impossibility.

*This will take some time...*

Once he'd found his answer, sleep took Rainier. That was until a rat ran over his foot and he had to kick it off.

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Rainier wheezed a cough, his lungs burning—almost like they were on fire—as he picked up another rough hewn basket of barley grains beside him.

Life in BlackGate was rather oppressive, shadowed by constant bleak reminders of the stifling austerity that continually enhanced with every passing second. But even worse was labor hours. He had been assigned to winnowing labor, so he was glad, considering he'd escaped skinning duty.

Still, it did not mean he was *completely* happy.

Kitchen work was the best, or so he'd heard. Washing dishes. Assisting with cooking. It was what the prisoners' referred to as, 'Feasting in the shade'. But, obviously, the *slopsuckers* without affiliations like him were never assigned such labors. Those sorts were reserved for the heads of the Families, who then made their underlings do the work while they lazed around. Rainier had been nobility just forty-one days ago, so it was only right his bones quivered when he thought about such things. His was such an abrupt fall from grace.

On the bright side, the guards assigned to watch over the prisoners on winnowing duty always stayed on the other side of the cramped arc that was the winnow yard. This was because of the overbearing dust in the air. In simpler words, he could take short breaks when he was tired.

Rainier tossed the mixture of grain and chaff in his basket with practiced but weary motions high into the air. The faint breeze swept away the lighter husks, letting the grains fall with dull thuds back into the basket. He coughed even worse than he'd done already as he poured his winnowed grains into a separate, larger basket, and dumped the one in his hand with the rest of its empty peers. His eyes then shifted to the last basket of chaff-filled barley to his right and he pressed his lips together.

Maybe he should rest for another minute or so.

Rainier leaned backward, placing his hand on the ground to prop his body up as he gazed at the unreachable sky high above him.

Just like every other inmate, he'd been brought to BlackGate blindfolded. Not even the layout of Stormspire, the inhabitable HedgeBeast-filled island the prison was built on, was allowed to him. Therefore, despite the circumstances, he never got to see the ocean in all its grandeur as it was described in the books he'd read.

He'd tried peeking at it from his cell's window, by the way; but the damned thing had been carved so high up into the walls he couldn't reach it. It was almost like the world was making sure the ocean was kept well away from his reach. Even the sky that shared a resemblance to it was beyond his grasp. Maybe, just maybe, the most sensible thing was for him to give up escaping after all.

Rainier scoffed, mocking his momentary weakness. His father would hand-chop his head if he did that. The main branch of the Stone family had never been one to buckle in the face of looming walls. They were the kind to make the walls bow.

Rainier sighed as he suddenly noticed a familiar presence behind him. "What do you want this time, Sot?"

"H-Huh?" The person whimpered. "D-Don't call me that. Stop calling me that."

Rainier sat upright and turned around. Sot came into view, a scrawny Halfling with a pointed nose by the name Booth Smallthumb. He was shivering and sniffing so badly one would think he had a severe disease. Rainier knew that was not the case with the haggard looking man though.

"Then what should I call you?" Rainier glanced at the number embroidered into the halfling's cell tunic. "Inmate 399?"

Sot's eyes darted about as though they were about to fall out of their sockets. "Y-You know me name. And me's n-not a drunkard." He winced while saying those last words. Denial was a tricky thing.

Rainier rolled his eyes. “You are. Not just on alcohol. I also suspect you’re here for something that will bring it into your hands, no?”

The halfling fell dead silent for a moment. Then he suddenly coughed and sneezed. “He... He said me should bring you.”

*I was wondering what was taking the bastard so long?*

Rainier looked at Sot without a change in expression. “Why are you telling me?”

“He said to do it without you knowing. Th-That’s impossible. So me’s asking for your help.”

“And why should I go?”

Sot shivered. This, though, wasn't from his addiction. “Y-You have to go. Please. M-Me needs it. Me feeling cold, you see.” Apparently, it was still from his addiction, just indirectly.

Rainier frowned slightly as he twirled his head and folded his arms. “I don’t know, Sot. It’s not like he’s going to beat you up if you fail, but I definitely will if I go. Why should I give up my body for you to satisfy your desires?”

Sot blinked rapidly, tears forming below his eyelids. No one would believe the Halfling was thirty-five years of age—fourteen years older than Rainier—and had been in BlackGate two years already. It seemed like addiction was a good tool for control. Rainier noted that down.

“Me...” Sot’s eyes shook for a moment as he hesitated. Then suddenly he stabilised. He smiled, still rubbing his arms against each other. “Me will help you escape.” Rainier raised a brow. “Y-You are always thinking about it, but you never go through with it. Me will help you. Me will.”

First of all, he’d already tried ten times—only he knew about that though. Second of all, why would he trust an addict when even those with their wits about them had betrayed him? Maybe if he was the one dealing the Poppy the little man liked so much he would have considered it.

Lastly... *Damn this bastard’s Soul voice.*

However, Rainier was not thinking about throwing Sot’s offer of help away. Besides, he had already planned to rely on the Halfling for something important, not just one so out in the sun that it would jeopardize every single thing he had in mind.

“I’m afraid of escaping, Sot,” Rainier lied.

Sot frowned. “B-But, your—”

“Be that as it may,” Rainier cut the Halfling off—*strongly*. “I’d still like your help. But with something else.”

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Rainier arrived at the storage room less than an hour later since he’d had to finish his labor and take the winnowed grains to the grain cellar. They were stored differently than the rest of the prison foodstuffs due to them being kept in sacks; more protected, to be precise. Otherwise, the countless rats, cockroaches, and other unfathomable pests roaming the prison would deal a great number to them before a new day dawned.

One overgrown rat even passed by Rainier’s feet in that instant. The food-thief had obviously been feasting a lot.

When all was said and done though, that was a problem for the guards. His was before him, seated on a barrel in the midst of salted and cured meat hanging from rusted iron hooks.

“I thought the morgue was more your style, Twirlybeard?” Rainier said with a slight bob of his head and downturned lips as though impressed.

Twirlbeard slightly raised a brow—*as though unimpressed*. “Where was you last night, pretty boy?”

“First of all, make sure to give Booth his Poppy. That guy looks like he will convulse soon. Second of all...” Rainier cocked his head to the side, an expression of an *honest-to-goodness* nonplus painted on his face. “Really? That’s your question? I’d heard you Black Cloaks were quite gutsy, but I would never have thought it was to this extent. Imagine asking me that. The sheer audacity.”

Twirlbeard scowled and said with a sharp tone layered over his gruff voice, “This look like a joke to you?”

Rainier’s body temperature rose significantly as his jaw stiffened. Keeping his spite in check proved difficult after all. He pointed at the dwarf. “You must have forgotten what my Boon is, you dirtbag of a midget.”

It had not been of his will, rather his father’s, but Rainier was tied to a Blood contract which put a leash on him from ever speaking of what his actual Boon was. Whenever he tried otherwise, his tongue would grow a mind of its own and he would blurt out some superfluous lie. Being arrested had forced his hand to come up with a makeshift Boon in that regard. After all, he’d had to answer the Emperor’s question and fill in something for



the prison records. And the presence of the damned Three-Eyed Raven in service to the Royal family had prevented him from claiming his family's Boon.

The prelude to such a development was something he understood though. He didn't resent his father for pushing him into a Blood contract. And besides, the heir to the main branch of the Stone family awakening a Boon different from the Regeneration Boon which had been passed down in their family for generations was not something worthy of celebration. It was also the only reason they had been kept so close to the Royal family. Its disappearance meant their discarding.

The contract was meant to last until his father had found some sort of way to prevent that outcome. But now the Duke had gone to a place so far away, and Rainier was stuck with a contract that could never be terminated.

At that moment, the door of the storage room closed. Rainier turned around immediately to see humans garbed in black cloaks emerge from the shadows around the dimly lit, windowless chamber.

He tsked after counting them. There were six. He then turned back to Twirlbeard who was smiling, the flickering light of the torches on the wall painting his body in an eerie glow.

Of course he had been expecting to be ambushed already, but the damned dwarf was really getting on his nerves now.

"Clairvoyance, huh, pretty boy?" Twirlbeard snickered, doing what he did best: annoying Rainier even more. "Guess you couldn't see this, though."

Even his choice of mockery was similar. No versatility.

Rainier exhaled exasperatingly. "How many times do I have to say this? Like everyone else, my Boon has limitations. I know what I know, and do not know what I do not know." He shrugged. "Work on your retentive memory."

Twirlbeard's smug expression vanished and was replaced with fury in an instant. "Beat him the fuck up!"

**###**

There was a popular misconception that was always passed around among the commoners in Norv. A noble's child was born filled with layers upon layers of talent. Music. Painting. Writing. *Fighting*. They knew it all and were trained in each field by the best of the best.

Boy, they couldn't have been more wrong. Especially in the fighting aspect.

Rainier swung, missed, and then a fist came out of nowhere and connected with his cheek, sending the storage room spinning as he crashed into the burly arms of some person—or, perhaps, box?

Honestly, after that hit, how was he to be sure which was which anymore?

His eyes were still spinning when he involuntarily caved in at the impact of a knee to his gut. And before he could catch his breath, another touched his chin in an embrace that was more on the aggressive than lovely side. A tremor wobbled his head, and for a moment there he felt like his skull had cracked.

It didn't end then though.

More fists, knees, and feet rained down on his body. Before Rainier knew it, he had been gang-battered by large men of his own race, and could taste nothing besides the metallic tinge of blood. The injuries were going to haunt him.

That was it. He gave up on this timeline of his life. Thankfully he had already registered this day in the first wheel of his Boon Ring after its refresh. Now he just had to cajole Twirlbeard into killing him. Which shouldn't be so hard.

In his redo, he was going to make sure to have breakfast first. Getting beat up was inevitable, so it would be less traumatizing for him if it was on a half-filled belly. Perhaps running away could turn out to be a feasible option.

"Hold him up," Twirlbeard ordered his goons with an amused tone, and of course the dogsbodies heeded.

Rainier didn't see the need to say it to their faces, but the one thing he hated the most after cowards were lackeys. Especially the ones who suckered up to a sex-driven dwarf in a black cloak.

Ah, only one bastard fitted that bill.

Rainier breathed heavily as he was put on his knees; even that had become quite the chore since his nose was broken.

"Damn it, Twirlybeard. You didn't hold back."

Twirlbeard scoffed as he jumped down from his barrel-throne and, with his arms behind his back, approached Rainier.

"Never been beat up like this before, huh, ex-noble?"

He really hadn't. He hated this sort of thing so he had always avoided altercations that would put him in similar messes. Well, twenty-one years just went down the drain.

“Why the violence, though?” Rainier asked. “Is this because I didn’t show up? This is a bit too much for that, no?”

“I don’t like being stood up.” Twirlbeard smiled and looked at the rest of his unoccupied goons. “Search him.”

They did without query, patting Rainier down even to the extent of checking his groin. Such insolence. But they had no victory.

Rainier was the one who smiled now. “Seriously? All this because of a pouch of weed? And here I thought you were angry because I denied you a pleasant evening.”

Twirlbeard frowned with a slight jerk-back of his head. “I told you. I know what I know and do not know what I do not know. But, honestly, if you wanted to *fuck* that inmate so badly you should have just scaled the Brobdingan.” He paused dramatically then chuckled. “Ah. That would be quite tasking, wouldn’t it? You’re a *dwarf* after all.”

Twirlbeard lost his reasoning, pulled out a blunt dirk, and stabbed it into Rainier’s belly. There was a loud gasp from the goons as Rainier coughed up blood, but they still did not let go of him.

He had banked on being choked to death, so getting stabbed came as a surprise, evident on his face.

Where had the dolt gotten a dirk?! Were the *irondogs* assigned to the kitchen out of their minds? Why couldn’t they do their works properly?

“You talk too much, pretty boy,” Twirlbeard snarled.

Rainier forced himself to speak despite the blood gurgling in his throat, “I thought I was more on the quiet side.” His lips shifted to one side. “By the way, I think I should tell you this so you can begin working on it. You stab like a child.”

There was a low chuckle for a moment there, from Twirlbeard, but it was instantly drowned out by constant wet, muffled squelches.

Rainier spilled out more and more blood through the pain racing throughout his body until he could spill no more. The goons holding him up let go of him after the dwarf’s barbaric act and he dropped to the floor, growing cold in subsequent intervals.

Even knowing he wouldn’t fully die, the damned thing was still melancholic. For some reason it always felt like he really was going to disappear. The worst thing was, that frightened him.

Having lost his sense of time, Rainier had no idea how long had passed, but a while later, the faint whispers of the culprits of his nearing murder disappeared. All that was left was the thrums of his low heartbeats and shallow gasps resounding in his ears.

He took that moment to summon his Boon Ring, focusing his attention on the first wheel as he awaited, patiently, for his body to bleed out. But just a second before he lost all sight of his, the door to the storage room flung open and a blurred figure walked in.

### 3-Don't You Feel Any Remorse?

The lights were so dim it felt unusual. No. It really was unusual. Rainier's cell was a lot brighter than this. Even though its window was small, enough daylight still found its way into its confines once morning came. Aside from that too, his head was hurting, his stomach burning, and... Why wasn't he feeling like vomiting? Surely he hadn't grown attuned to the nausea already.

Rainier winced as his eyes slowly adjusted to his surroundings. Then, finally, it all became clear. The low ceiling and the cobwebs staining its beams. The barrels, hooked meats, wooden boxes. They all appeared. At the same time, his nose was struck with a sickly-sweet odor of rotten vegetables and the briny stench of pickled fish. He understood in an instant. He had not bitten the dust as he'd wanted.

*Damn it!*

Rainier sat up with a groan, shifting backwards across the unclean floor until his back touched the barrel Twirlbeard had sat on. He frowned, trying to reach for whatever his subconscious might have noticed as he was passing out—some memories, voices, scent, perhaps. Then, he recalled. Just before his eyes had closed the storage room had been opened and a figure had walked in.

It was obvious that whoever that person was had been the one who'd saved his life. But who could that have been? A guard? Impossible. Those guys didn't give a rat's ass about a dying prisoner unless Gaoler Kieran was involved. Then was it Gaoler Kieran himself? But what could he have been seeking in the storage room? Rainier instantly discarded the thought as he recalled the figure not being as tall as the Gaoler. He had been drowsy, but making out indistinct features even when he was out of it was one of his commendable traits. A specialty Mother Nature had bestowed upon him to make up for his lapses, he liked to say.

There was only one explanation left. Sot had seen it all and called for help. *Pfft*. As if. That halfling was as pigeon-hearted as he was a sack of bones. He would never go anywhere his lanceolate nose smelled trouble brewing.

It seemed Rainier's mystery helper was what they were: A mystery.

He clicked his tongue, then glanced down at his midriff and raised his roughed up tunic. Where he had been stabbed was covered with a torn piece of clothing—which seemed to be a stocking—serving as a makeshift linen bandage; a means to stanch his wounds, he figured. Natheless, it was doing such an awful job. He breathed in and out shallowly, causing the binding darkened with his blood and sweat to be tugged at; a subtle reminder of a singular sentence that now made him fume...

*The injuries were going to haunt him...*

“Great...” Rainier bit his lower lip before hissing with his chin clenched. “Even a condemned ex-noble can’t die in peace in prison anymore.”

As if to ease his irritation with the answer he so badly sought, the door opened. A person who bore an eerily identical height and width to the one he had seen while blacking out walked in, and Rainier’s head almost exploded.

What was she doing here? No... He looked at her ripped white stockings. What in the four seas had possessed her to warrant her actions?

“You’re awake,” the lady said, holding a bowl and bread in her hands. Her voice was a little more smooth and insouciant than Rainier would have liked to hear, still it did well to remove him from his thoughts. “Good. Now you can eat.”

On the instant, Rainier hid his shock and assumed a stoic expression. “Your handiwork, Dinsmoore?”

Cerulean eyes, a thin, supple, and elegant figure, and ears pointed like an elf’s—though only halfway the length of theirs—as well as curly hair with the silver color of their race. Tyla Dinsmoore. Half-elf, half-human, as well as the only daughter and child of Gaoler Kieran Dinsmoore. Exactly. She was the one female stupid enough to go beyond the kitchen and freely roam the walls of a male prison like it was her *backyard*. Just because the prison guards were ordered to keep her safe, by the way.

There was a bit more to that actually. But Rainier’s brain was hurting more than enough just by looking at her. Maybe his skull had really been broken, or perhaps he was a lot more angry than he’d have liked to believe.

Was this normal? Raging at being kept alive? Obviously not. He’d tried his best to make sure all that had happened, and was happening, held no say in his mental state; at the end of the day, that would do more harm than good to him considering his plan to get back to Emma and all that he would have to do for it to become reality. But as much as he’d hated to thread down that path, it was a likelihood that his constant deaths were slowly getting to him. Perchance he would end up mad after all, regardless of his wishes. Especially if he kept getting beat up in similar ragged manners to the one he’d received before dying. Fine courtesy of Twirlbeard and his goons.

Regardless, that wasn’t a problem that could be figured out at the moment, so he threw it to the back of his mind—just like his short-lived thought of suicide to free himself from his pain. “A lady’s presence should always be respected,” his mother used to say. Dinsmoore was before him. He should give her his attention for now. After all, even

though he was not quite grateful, from a neutral standpoint, she had saved his life—the life of a prisoner. His eyes narrowed. Which was... *unexpected*.

“Is that a way to talk to someone who went out of her way to save your life?” She walked closer delicately, as though a step taken quicker would cause her ankle to separate from its joint.

To say the truth, Rainier was baffled at that—the delicate nature of her approach. He’d come across countless noblewomen, who, no doubt, sparkled like the finest of gems. Beautiful, they were. Their etiquettes honed to the core by teachings upon teachings of whichever governess had been carted into their castles. Many of them had wanted his hand in wedlock, and most of them he’d wanted nothing to do with. They pretty much wanted nothing to do with him too now, ironically. Well, what he was trying to get at was: Dinsmoore could have very easily been one of those ladies had she grown up in Norv and not on a secluded island like Stormspire.

What a waste. It wouldn’t have been him, but she would have shot her house up a notch with her beauty and elegance. Really. What a waste.

“I take it it’s also because of you that I’ve not been bundled out of here and struck yet.” Rainier decided to pry his mind away from the thoughts of pity wheeling around in his head.

“Do you need a confirmation?” She stopped directly before him, her green kirtle held to her waist by a leather belt as she peered down at him with those pretty eyes of hers.

Rainier enjoyed gazing at women endowed with beauty, but depending on the situation it could get on his nerves. Weirdly, despite her absurd charm, this one was doing just that. He nudged a brow up. “Aren’t you being quite the careless princess, Dinsmoore? What would daddy say?”

Instead of a frown, she smiled. “Answering a question with a question. How *noble* of you.” She squatted and placed the bowl, which contained a crudely made soup, before Rainier, along with the rye bread to go with it.

“Was that a jape?”

Her hands were now free so she was able to place a palm over her mouth like she had inadvertently committed a grave sin. “My. Pardon me, my lord. I must have been out of my wits.”

Rainier had never spoken to her before, so he hadn’t realized... She was quite the sarcastic sweetheart. His face squeezed into a frown. “You care not for the details as to how I became this way?”

“The son of a murdered Duke in prison, and one with a foul mouth to boot? I have all my answers.” Tyla scoffed. “Now eat and regain your energy,” she continued with a stronger tone, “so I can take my guards away from here.”

Rainier had a couple more things to say, but filling his stomach came first. Someone who had saved his life couldn't have brought something poisonous for him to eat. Which was why Rainier had not fed the food and Dinsmoore scrutinizing gazes before digging into it.

“I must ask,” the elf-human began as Rainier took a bite of the hard rye bread and downed it with a sip of stew. “Why is it you speak quite crudely for a descendant of the Stone household?” She sat down on a box a considerable distance away from him. Caution, perhaps. Wise of her.

That aside, what did she think she knew about his household to warrant such a comment? It was preposterous of her to even assume she knew anything about them at all. And... Crude? What nonsense.

Rainer forced himself to swallow faster than he had been intending, the lingering taste of a mishmash of spices about his tongue. He'd gotten used to ingesting the nonsensical prison meals already, which was why he did not wince. Despite being fed a plethora of salt and water with a little sprinkle of carrots and random spices as stew, mind you.

“Well,” Rainier answered with a clenched chin, “it's hard to maintain etiquette when you spend most of your time waddling through the slums of Norv. Not everyone's got the willpower of a Dinsmoore.”

The Dinsmoore house had been the watchers of BlackGate ever since its inception. It took exceptional willpower for a family to commit themselves to a secluded island for eternity, and, considering the way the Dinsmoore lady was speaking, not fall into the snares of crudeness.

*Tsk.* That word really got on his nerves. If only she was not a lady he would have given her a piece of his mind.

“Hmm...” that was all the Dinsmoore lady said, her chin on the back of her palm, until Rainier finished his meal. Then she opened her mouth, “Don't you feel any remorse?”

Rainier looked at her with a narrowed gaze. He knew where she was headed and he would have lost his appetite if only he hadn't finished gobbling up the garbage of a meal he'd been served. He clicked his tongue and shrugged, groaning from the sharp pain in his midsection after. “Why should I?”



And it was no joke of his. He genuinely saw no reason why he should be feeling any remorse. That was not the emotion rampaging within him. She had asked the wrong question.

Dinsmoore scoffed. "Quite the noble piece of shit." She jumped down from the box. "Maybe I should have just let you die, parent killer. The goodness of my heart got the better of me."

Rainier had been about to make a quirky comment when an optimistic question suddenly ran through his head: How would his escape fare if he managed to get Tyla Dinsmoore on his side? It would prove difficult to win her trust, undoubtedly, but once he did, there were a lot of benefits to reap from it. True, there was the danger of her exposing his plans to her father, but it wasn't like he had been considering letting her in on it in the first place. He would just use her to get some things he would have been unable to get his hands on without having to sacrifice two to three pouches of weed. Weighing it, she would prove to be a good asset. There was also something very important he needed her for, now that he gave it some thought.

All of a sudden, Rainier's mien changed.

"I do feel remorse." Dinsmoore looked at him skeptically. The change in words and tone was so abrupt that anyone would have instantly written him off as a liar if they were in her place. Maybe she was trying to give him the benefit of the doubt since she didn't say anything. "They're my parents after all."

"You should have thought about that before using their organs for whatever grisly experiments you were carrying out."

Rainier still couldn't fathom why the one who had murdered his parents had ripped out their organs. What he did know was that he was going to rip out theirs in the same way, just a lot more painfully.

"For that... I have no words."

She snorted. "Get up. You've overstayed." Rainier acted like he was hesitant, his gaze anchored on her face like metal to a magnet. "What do you have to say?"

Rainier pressed his lips together. "I'd only seen you from a distance all this while, so forgive my prior rudeness. Now that I look at you up close, you're quite the beauty, Dinsmoore."

She rolled her eyes. "Save your flattery, Stone. I've heard many a lot of the sort."

"Well none of those had been from me. If I'm allowed to say, my lady, my words carry genuineness."

“You aren’t allowed to, parent killer,” Dinsmoore sneered. “Let me enlighten you on something, by the way. Remus Mooney craves my warmth just as much as you...” she eyed Rainier... “now seem to want it—”

“A misconception. As is the absurd nickname you have thrown my way. Your warmth isn’t what I need.”

“Oh? And what exactly do you seek from me?”

“You.” And he wasn’t lying. “Warmth would merely be a bonus.”

The Dinsmoore lady was silent. Then...

“Ors. Oakes,” Tyla called, and two elven guards rushed into the storage room with looks that said they were ready to pounce and beat Rainier up with haste. “Escort my lord Stone to the open yard. It seems the lengthened rest has muddled his mind. The sun should do him some good.” She smiled.

The only sounds Rainier could make were groans of pain as he was roughly hoisted up, hurled insults at by the guards, and dragged out of the storage room. Thankfully, he had read the Dinsmoore lady’s expression and had saved his experience in his Boon Ring’s second wheel just before the guards came in and interfered.

For the first time, his two wheels had experiences of a single day saved in them. But it didn’t matter. There was no certainty he would get to interact with the Dinsmoore lady if he went too far back in time. And he was not trying to relive his stabbing tale just for that. This way was good.

###

The open yard was a bleak, muddy space surrounded by the looming Brobdingan and its watchtowers, where, of course, the gazes of guards remained ever vigilant. Sparse, gnarled trees with a skeletal outlook dotted the scenery, offering barely any shade to the prisoners beneath them; though in their sea, some flourishing greenery stood, magic, their fertilizer. But, needless to say, those were shared between the Families.

Rainier was settled directly on the ground far away from the trees and the commotion that came with their surroundings. He was yet to catch a glimpse of Twirlbeard, but he was certain that the dwarf or his goons would have seen him already. Honestly, that should have been barely difficult considering how he’d been brought into the open yard. It had given some of the inmates the impression that he’d been in Solitary prison. But since he did not look beaten enough for that they’d all turned away a few seconds of scrutiny later.

“...pale. Y-You look pale.” Sot appeared without warning. Rainier turned to look at the halfling. He was shivering in a far worse manner than earlier. There were beads of sweat on his forehead too. A lot. “W-What happened to you?” Sot asked.

Rainier returned his gaze back to the Iron net, the only part of the Brobdingan that allowed *solely* visuals between the male prison and the female prison. The inmates lounging around it were continuously cheering the lewd shenanigans the female prisoners on the other side were up to, but they dared not touch it talk less of scaling it, lest they would be electrocuted.

What absurd starvation. Rainier felt disgusted at the sight. He wasn't even sure if it was because of the lot at the Iron net, or the possibility that he had not seen that satyromaniac of a dwarf because he was lost within them. The fact that such a person had become a thorn in his ass made him even angrier.

“What do you think?” Rainier snapped at Sot. Realizing pushing his anger onto the halfling was not a decent act, he took in a deep breath and exhaled. “Did you at least get your fix?” He already knew the answer to that. It was quite obvious.

“Uhm...” Sot sniffled, his chin quivering. “Me's going to get it soon, me hope. He said me should come back later.”

*That dirtbag! I told him!*

Rainier's gut stung. He groaned and rubbed his palm on it.

“Y-You okay?” Sot asked, leaning in slightly.

*Bollocks! No! No, I'm not, Sot!*

Rainier closed his eyes, taking a second to calm his nerves. “What I asked for?” He changed the conversation immediately as he turned his attention towards the direction of the tree the Greenvine Family had taken as their base. There was a small cluster amongst their numbers there, and it was fairly obvious that someone was being roughed up.

“Ah? Ah!” Sot shuddered as though he had forgotten their deal, but Rainier told himself that the halfling wouldn't have been stupid enough to make such a mistake. It would force him to have to pummel the addict a large number of times. “Me's got it.”

*Good.*

Sot began to narrate all he'd gathered. It was a lot, so Rainier had to filter out the less important information in favor of the ones he needed at the moment. Then he got a rather valuable piece from Sot's rambles.

“Repeat it,” he ordered.

“Huh?” Sot looked lost. “Repeat w-what?”

“The last thing you just said.”

“Uhm... That there’s some bad blood between Forr and Twirlbeard?” Sot’s lips parted to one side as his head tilted slightly. He was unsure, but he was correct. Rainier didn’t say anything though. He simply cupped his chin and lowered his head, staying in his thoughts for a while.

*This could work...*

He looked at Sot. “What caused the bad blood?”

“A Poppy deal,” Sot said and Rainier scoffed. *Ironic*. “Twirlbeard claimed Forr was out to cheat him during the deal. Uhm... T-Then they fought and the Poppy pouches brought to the deal vanished. Forr says Twirlbeard stole it, but Twirlbeard d-denies it.” Sot winced. Rainier narrowed his eyes at the halfling.

“How many pouches were brought to the deal?”

“T-Two,” Sot answered.

“Were you there during it all?” Rainier asked. “It’s just... I don’t feel like I can trust this information. It’s almost like you’re lying. Perhaps I’ll have to get confirmation from someone else. And since we made a deal, you know what will happen once I find out you’re lying to me, don’t you?”

“No!” Sot sounded agitated. “T-There’s different kinds of stories flying around. *Me* was there. In hiding, me tell you. You have to believe me!”

“I don’t know Sot—”

“Me’s not lying! Me never lies.”

Rainier scoffed, not because he thought Sot was lying—the halfling was arguably the most truthful person he’d met, unless it came to denying his addiction—but because he’d gotten the answer he sought. “Alright. When did it happen? The failed deal, I mean.”

“Ten days b-before the next shipment of prisoners had arrived. Ah... Which was when *you* arrived too.”

*So Gaoler Kieran had not been around... In other words, his absence would trigger the Families and gangs to most likely act out...*

It was a piece of information Rainier was extremely glad to have. He could not think of much use of it for now, but he was certain it would come in handy soon. After all, in ten days time, the Gaoler would have to head to Norv to bring in the next batch of prisoners.

“Out with the rest.”

Sot heeded without delay, narrating every piece of information he'd gathered. Some were prospects for future use, most were a bunch of gibberish. Then there was no more. Rainier nodded at that point.

“Payment accepted. More than enough even.” That was true. The information he'd received was something he could keep on using until he'd escaped BlackGate. A single death was not going to make it unusable. The ex-noble stood up, Sot's eyes following his every action like a child expecting sweets or something of the sort. “Because of that, I'll let you in on a secret.”

“A-A secret?” Sot seemed to beam, his sniffing ceasing for a moment. “Me likes secrets.”

“Twirlbeard isn't giving you no Poppies.” Sot's expression crashed. Rainier looked at him. “Don't you worry, though. I'll get you a pouch full of the damn drug.”

Sot's eyes widened as a smile took over his face. For a moment there it even seemed like he stopped shivering. “T-Thank you! Me's grateful!”

“Don't be,” Rainier cut in. “You'll be indebted to me.”

### **QUESTIONS I WANT AN ANSWER TO:**

- General enjoyment as a reader.
- Thoughts and opinions about the characters?
- I'm wondering if Rainier comes off as smart (don't want the dumb allegations of RR readers)
- How's the pacing?
- Again. The plot! Is the plot engaging?
- If this was a random story on Royalroad, would you still keep reading after this chapter?

Thank you in advance for the help!