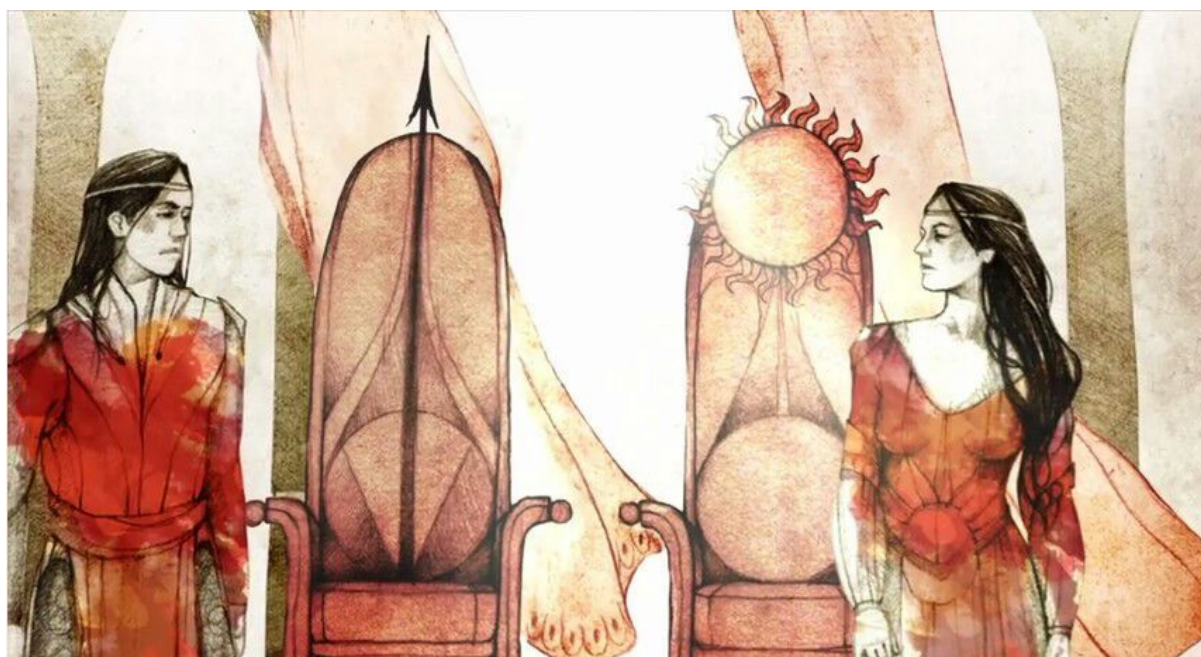


NYMERIA'S WAR: HISTORY & LORE



Book 1

Jamison Dayne - Knighthood

“Upholders of the Seven, common killers in shining armor, beacons of hope throughout the land, and savages with a title.” Jamison said with an arrogant tone and a smirk on his face. “Those are just a few of the many ways, good or bad that people describe knighthood and the men that follow this path.” Truthfully he said, “I myself believe that knighthood lies somewhere in between.”

Now serious he said, “From as far back as I can remember, I dreamed about becoming a knight. I mean, who wouldn’t? An honorable and just man who defends the downtrodden and fights for the greater good, it was all I wanted as a boy, and sometimes I wish it still was. I closed my eyes and thought about the ancient Andals that came across the Narrow Sea to stake their claim on Westeros, and brought knighthood with them. With their lances, iron weapons, and organized massed formations, the Andals were a force unlike any the First Men had ever seen. They conquered all of Westeros south of the Neck, and did it all in the name of their gods.” A small smirk appeared on the face of the young knight. “I mean, this is what my septon taught me and since he is a direct messenger of the gods themselves, it has to be true.” Jamison said this with sarcasm in his voice.

Back to being serious Jamison said, “I thought about the former Swords of the Morning from my own family, House Dayne. All of these men, however different from one another they were, they were also considered to be the epitome of being a knight along with being all that is good in the world. I remember thinking about how unbelievable it was that I share their name. And more than anything I dreamed of wielding their sword “Dawn” someday. However, I thought the best of them all was the Sword of the Evening, also known as the best knight in all of Dorne, King Vorian Dayne. He had won several tournaments along with winning countless battles and most importantly to me, he is my father. I think of his shining silver plate armor and his sword that shines so bright that I could see my face in it.”

“My father in my eyes was exactly what a knight should be, and what I wanted to be like when I grew up.” Now smiling, Jamison said “However, truth be told, I didn’t just want to be like all of these men. In the end of the day those men were servants, and I wanted to be better than all of them.”

Now speaking with determined words, Jamison went on: "In tourneys I wanted men to know that when they face me they are all competing to be the second best, and in battle to just be grateful if they make it out alive. Unusual outlook I know, but honestly, why become a knight if you believe otherwise?" Jamison remarked with an all-knowing tone in his voice.

"Despite all that I've said, I will admit that I would be lying to you if I said that the day I was knighted was not one of the happiest days of my life. I was knighted for valor in battle at the age of 15 when I helped root out an army of rogue hedge knights at the border of our kingdom and the Blackmont's. These men were taking tolls in the name of our kingdoms." Jamison rolled his eyes. "Well their leader decided to test a young squire in single combat, and let's just say I made him bend his knee to me – and then I made his neck bend as well. Safe to say, these men were of no trouble after that. It is funny looking back at it really, because I understand why those men did what they did, you do what you must to succeed. Those men just picked the wrong kingdom to try it in, and for that they paid the price." Jamison said this proudly.

"The point I am trying to make is that everything is not exactly as it seems. There is no good, and there is no bad when it comes to your actions – there is only what must be done to succeed. Or maybe that is just a lie I tell myself, who knows." Jamison said this with genuine uncertainty. "What I do know is that I am far from the young boy who dreamed of being a true knight when I see my armor of black with the purple amethysts adorning it and my sword "Dark Moon" with a blade so dark that blood does not even stain it. I think about my words and actions that have at times been far from my vows. However, I will say that those vows that knights are made to speak are impossible to hold to anyway – you always break one or the other."

"Men and women alike call me the Sword of the Night, some in innocent ways, some in more respectful ways than the others. You can say that I may not be the truest knight of them all, but I am the knight that is needed and I am the knight that will get us through our troubles and I am the one who will put House Dayne exactly where it belongs."

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Ser Myke of the Marches - Family

Myke adjusted his seating, his back sore from sparring all day. He looked her in the eyes, those attracting green eyes, which stared at him with wonder and curiosity. They were a

beautiful sight, the only sight to be seen by the one candle that was planted in between him. The room was dim, the horrors of the night were upon them.

"I may not be a Caron, but it's you who I fight for." He began, his voice croaky and weak. He hovered his strong obsolete hand over the candle flame in front of him, staring at its odd beauty.

"Long ago I came across your family, returning home and travelling south to the Marches. Aye, I repelled an attack on this barren land, and aye I saved your father. He anointed me, gave me land, though it never much mattered to me." Myke remarked, staring at his old hands.

He lifted his eyes, looking at the beautiful young girl that he used to take on his lap and tell her the mad tales of his time in Essos. The bards, the jesters, the difference of the land. She would always be so captivated, so interested. She was wild, yet timid. Courageous but held back. Myke sent her a warm smile, to which she always had replicated back. He had no children of his own blood, but in his eyes this girl was his daughter.

"Thousands of years ago, your family thrived in strength and power. Legendary names like Bethany and Gareth Caron, names that live on through the ages." Myke stated, his eyes stared through her, looking into nothing. "Yet now, this house is little but another vassal for another king." Myke lowered his eyes, resting his hand on the table in front of him.

Her soft and gentle hand reached out for his, caressing his tough skin and bringing him the hope he had always needed from her. His eyes met hers, and for once, Myke felt happiness in his life. It was the happiness one could obtain from cradling their newborn in their arms, watching their eldest son pick up the reins for their first time.

Her eyes stared into his, those green gems pleading for him to continue this final story. Myke smiled, and nodded. "Yet no matter the power of this great house, no matter the struggles you will endure or the pains you will be forced to suffer. Always remember the sweet song that chirps for us to continue fighting, as there is no song so sweet but that of family."

Myke could see the tears of joy welling up in her eyes, the sudden fiery happiness that rushed through her. She leapt into his arms, knocking him and his wooden stool over, landing on his sore back. The pain surged through him, yet it mattered not. Her love healed all the pain that he had endured, and there was truly no song so sweet.

The Purple Ocelot - Assassination of Lord Arthur the Drunkard

"Have you ever wondered what do people mean when they say they've started a new life, m'lord?" Asked the assassin who went by the name Purple Ocelot. "I've always thought they're foolish." He continued casually. "The gods only grant you one. But I think there was one time when I understood them more than ever. When was it? Around ten years ago, I guess. It was around the time people started hearing about me."

"If you want to understand how good I am with assassinations and how much can you trust me with my job, you need to know how I started." The assassin said this with a small sigh. "I was but a simple merchant once. I was selling beautiful clothes made by more and less talented tailors with my mother. I don't even remember her name. My life has just changed so much that I simply forgot. I think it was Elyana, but no promises." The Purple Ocelot smirked subtly as he said this. "Yes, it was definitely Elyana. My mother Elyana and I were merchants just as everyone from her family. We never really had a home. We were moving constantly from place to place on our caravan, in which we also slept. It had two horses who were always ready to ride. There were situations in which bandits wanted to get our goods, so they were also ready for that. This caravan also had a job to be a movable stall, so we sold goods from there, too. We bought food from stores, we were living like hedge knights. The summer fairs were the best times to sell anything, and we decided to attend at Lord Martell's summer fair that year."

"The scenery was beautiful. Multiple markets were set up, music was being played by musicians who clearly enjoyed what they were doing, sun was shining up in the sky, Lord Martell's vassals came to just have fun." There was a touch of sadness in the Purple Ocelot's words, but he smiled. "I was pretty confident in making some coin. Our goods were excellent quality, after all. There was this woman who bought a dress for her upcoming wedding, a mayor of some wasteland town bought robes for his son who stayed at Martell's court, we were just overflowing with clients. And so, the day was nearing an end and rarely anyone attended to our part of the market and we were thinking about closing our caravan, but decided to still wait for a moment. And then I saw him." Darkness took over the assassin's eyes.

"A man dressed in blue and yellow, accompanied by several soldiers, his personal guard. From the way he walked, I could only assume he was drunk. His soldiers were carrying round shields, on which a golden leopard holding an axe in a bend azure-silverish background was painted. It was House Santagar's coat of arms, as I quickly learned." The

Purple Ocelot closed his eyes for a second before continuing the story. "The man was gross." He said with hateful words. "He started laughing and waving his arms around when he saw my mother. She left the caravan thinking he wants to buy something. Instead, he approached her closely and asked if she wanted to be fucked by the great Arthur Santagar, lord of Spottswood. Those really were his words; I remember it clearly. He never stated his nickname, the Drunkard, apparently known in all of Eastern Dorne. We had never really heard it though. Elyana and I were from Central Dorne, my father I'd rather not speak about - all I know that he was a coward lordling from the Stormlands who ran as fast as he could when he learned his "girlfriend" became pregnant." The assassin let out a dry chuckle and continued. "Anyway, I digress. My mother refused and so he threw her against the wall of nearby building, started ripping her clothes apart, I... don't want to get into details. Anyway, when I heard screaming, I left the caravan, I yelled. Santagar noticed me and screamed *'What?! You've got someone else in there? Was that your fucking plan, bitch? To expose me? Guards, KILL HIM!'*. Those are the exact words, I remember."

"My mother cried, but of course the Drunkard wouldn't stop. Nobody came to our help. She yelled for me to run away. I quickly entered the caravan when I saw Arthur's guards running towards me. I immediately jumped at the driver's seat and ordered the horses to move. I was gone before they knew it. I only saw how the "lord" killed her after being done with her." The Purple Ocelot stopped talking for a moment, breathing in and out with a sharp gaze in his eyes. "I wasn't even thinking straight. It was my instincts that made me go to Spottswood. I was blinded by rage. I wanted to murder him. I wanted to repay him, I wanted to get my fucking revenge, but when I arrived there I realized I never really had a plan to begin with. I looked around and bought myself a nice little dagger from the local blacksmith with the coin I had made in the fair. I was thinking of a sword, but that wouldn't have worked since I have a small dysfunction in my arms. I can't really carry heavy objects, you know? But don't worry, m'lord - this won't affect my mission." The assassin assured, and the lord nodded calmly. "Anyway, I came up with a plan right after a feast was announced to be held in Santagars' castle. As if the fucking lord didn't have enough festivities. I dressed myself in some robes I was supposed to be selling - the ones you see me in right now. I entered the castle as a nobleman with new trade offers to House Santagar. The feast was fabulous. It amused me that they served more ale and other alcohols than food. This was no feast, it was a "drink-until-you-fall-under-the-table" party. After a few hours, everyone was already drunk, including the Drunkard himself. I approached him slowly, and put the dagger right through his heart. He was dead. I removed the dagger and ran away. The guards were outside the hall, because Arthur felt they're making feasts unpleasant if they're inside. Fool. They

suspected nothing.” The Purple Ocelot let out a small chuckle as he said this, shaking his head in amusement.

“Before I left Spottswood though, I was approached by a man who wanted me to kill his wife, who was cheating on him. He said he'd pay. He told me the tale of “the Purple Ocelot”. Apparently one of the guests wasn't too drunk and noticed me killing the Drunkard, but didn't recognize me. *“I saw him plunging a dagger into Lord Arthur's heart, but I was too slow to intervene. Like an ocelot, he ran away before anything could be done”* The legend was born, so to say.”

“I accepted the job, I was in need of money anyway, and I knew I couldn't live as a travelling merchant anymore. It wasn't safe. As a merchant, they'd want my head for witnessing Santagar's evil deeds. They would be too scared to screw with a so-called Purple Ocelot. I've been getting better and better ever since. And now I'm here, Lord Alaric” The Purple Ocelot finished his story. He sat comfortably in his chair, tying his blue scarf a bit tighter.

“I understand.” Alaric grunted. “Well, looks like I found the right man. I accept your deal, Ser. I only hope Albin won't hear of this”, Alaric said in a worried tone. They shook their hands.

“He won't. I know what I'm doing.” The Purple Ocelot replied and left the room, leaving Alaric looking somewhat satisfied.

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Malcolm Dayne – History of House Dayne

“Located along the western coast of Dorne, my family's ancient stronghold of Starfall stands proudly on an island overlooking the Torrentine, as the river rapidly flows into the Summer Sea.” The crown prince of House Dayne began with a proud tone to his voice. “Starfall has stood since the Dawn of Days, when the legend tells that the first Dayne, whose name has since been lost in time, followed a falling star to this island, and founded our great capital here.” A small smirk appeared on Malcolm's face.

“So yes, with great pride, we do trace our ancestry back to the First Men.” He remarked happily. “But there is one thing about that which genuinely perplexes me.” The Prince now spoke with a questioning look on his eyes. “My family does descend from the First Men, yet most of my family look more like the dragonlords of Valyria, but I have digressed.”

"But once my ancestors founded our great keep, they set to conquest." Malcolm now spoke with pride filled and serious words. "At first, my family conquered nearly the entire western coast in a variety of ways from petty kings bending their knees to us and also through sheer force. However, these minor bits of land bordering the Torrentine were just the beginning. My family's urge for conquest was far from over, with my ancestors looking towards east. And at our peak, House Dayne's rule over Dorne stretched well into the deserts with nearly a quarter of Dorne being under the rule of the Kingdom of Torrentine." Malcolm said this with great satisfaction.

"Even though, House Dayne won most of that land through conquest, we kept it because like many great men throughout history have said, once a man goes to his knees, you must help them back to their feet. And that we did." For a moment the Prince closed his eyes, and he could almost see those days of glory. "All of our bannerman and smallfolk respected our rule, and our kings respected them. The various Kings of Starfall from that time all ruled with honor, but unfortunately it cannot be said that every Dayne king ruled this way, and I believe that cost us a high price." There was now disappointment in the eyes of Malcolm.

"Some of my ancestors in later times began to take advantage of our people and our kingdom." He said with a sigh. "They drove our people into unnecessary wars with desires of even further conquest, with my family wanting to stretch our kingdom even further east, and even into the Reach. We sacked Oldtown and left many other great lands in ruin. All that for our own personal glory, and the foul desire to stretch our kingdom even wider, but as I truthfully believe, no bad deed goes unpunished. We eventually went too far and picked a fight we could not win. A little more than a century ago we were defeated by House Dryland, when King Gerold, the second of his name, surrendered in defeat and with nearly half of our kingdom, because of abysmal leadership and because we simply could not hold it."

"Even now, you will often hear people say that our former king was a craven or a coward bending the knee to the Drylands and giving up most we had gained." Malcolm remarked, annoyed at the thought. "I myself believe him to have made the right decision. I do not see any reason in having more of our people die over some land and a lost cause. I would have done the same thing as him." Malcolm said this with an honest and genuine tone.

A smile returned to Malcolm's face. "However, for all that fame or infamy that House Dayne has obtained from our reputation for being a strong kingdom, we are best known for a sword – my family's ancestral greatsword known as "Dawn". It is said that it was forged from the heart of a fallen star, and it is not being passed down from lord to lord, but rather it is only

given to a Dayne knight who is deemed honorable and possesses the martial skills worthy of wielding it.”

“Dawn is the pride of my family, and it has always been a point that it did not end up in the wrong hands. Who knows how long it will stay that way.” Malcolm said this with discouraged and slightly defeated tone.

“However, regardless of my family’s past, we have completely recovered.” The confidence was back in Malcolm’s words. “Even with fewer plots of land than we had before, House Dayne is truly strong. With our vast and impressive army along with our decent sized royal fleet, House Dayne could be a force to be reckoned with – by land or sea. However, as I have mentioned we have no need for all of that. We have everything we need on the lands we have now, and I have no need to see my kingdom’s people suffer. Thankfully my father, King Vorian, feels the same way. While he is more than capable of leading our armies to conquer and expand our kingdom again, he knows there is no need for it, and he wants peace.”

“However, that opinion is not shared by all of my family.” Malcolm said with a touch of concern in his voice. “My younger brother Jamison yearns to conquer and reclaim all of our old lands back, and more.” Malcolm let out a small laugh, but looked slightly annoyed at the thought of that. “Could we do that? Possibly, but there is no need for it, and I personally see his ideas as nothing more than him showing just why he can never be a king. Thankfully though, Jamison is not the king nor is he the heir, I am.” He said this with great relief. “But I, just like my father, will keep this kingdom strong, and I will keep my people safe and out of harm.” Malcolm said this with determined words. “Our kingdom’s people depend on us to keep them safe, and I also want our kingdom to prosper financially – just like it has under my father’s rule.”

“With that said, I am not as weak as people perceive me.” Malcolm said this with a slight bit of anger in his voice. “Like my father I will not ask for war, but at the same time, no one better test my kingdom or its might, because House Dayne has proved its strength before, and we can always do it again.”

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Aisha – The Arrival to Blackmont

With the last given breath of her dear teacher Armaro, Aisha had found a letter under his already stiff, pale hand. There had been a broken seal of House Blackmont on it, which had awakened the curiosity in Aisha. Staring at the wooden door in front of her, Aisha remembered how she had gently grabbed the paper, feeling its finest quality under her fingertips. With her purple eyes she had devoured line after line, realizing that it was a summoning from King Benedict of Blackmont. Excitement had ran across her spine, forcing her to look again on the corpse of her dead friend. God had taken him away too early and unexpectedly – Aisha had felt angered that he did not take the sickness out of him, the most faithful of his servants. Her anger had not lasted long though – it was the decision from the Greatest Gods of them all – the God who embraced her filthy and undeserving presence, and she accepted the faith He had chosen for Armaro. Now she was left all by herself, now she was chosen by the God to be the replacement of her teacher. And now she stood behind the door, fulfilling the quest that had been given to Armaro.

While opened, the big wooden door screeched slowly, filling the hall with unpleasant noise. Aisha stood between two massive wings, well-hidden under her black-reddish cloak. She observed her surroundings and faces, which were staring at her dark figure with interest.

“Is it the great Armaro who finally decided to honor our thresholds?” The deep voice echoed through the throne room, making Aisha to fix her sight at the man who had spoken. He was in his late forties, pale with long, very dark brown hair. He seemed to be tall and skinny by the position he was sitting on the throne. His eyes were looking tired, but still curious with the blue shade within them. A joyless smile was visible on his clean shaven face. “Come on then, I don’t have the whole night!” He rushed her. *“Ah, so this is the Benedict in his full form... the King who wants to play with the Gods”*, Aisha thought.

Aisha smiled gently, knowing that no one could see her face nor body through this thick material. She could hear the whispers surrounding her, coming from the King’s advisors and guards. She could see interest, fear, and anticipation in their eyes. She could feel the weaknesses and strengths of them. Her feet moved forward, advancing towards the throne. She walked slowly, feeling the tension hanging in the air. She slowly raised her hands and grabbed the cloak firmly, pulling it down with a swift move. *“Finally, it started to become quite warm in here”*, she thought, raising her head high and giving everyone around the confident and strong gaze. She could hear the barely muffled voices now, commenting on this unexpected event. She felt hungry eyes on her, as well as terrified ones.

“King Benedict” She said out loud, which caused all the chats around to disappear in one second. Her voice was calm but grave in same. “I am answering your summoning.”

Aisha could see the surprise on the King’s face. She could see his eyes travelling from top of her head down to her feet. Her skimpy robes seemed to be quite controversial in this moment, but she did not really care at all. It was too warm within these walls for her, like almost everywhere. She did not feel ashamed of her body either, even while it was showing random scars she possessed from her past. With slow motion, she brushed her long hair behind her ear, not taking an eye out of the King.

Benedict cleared his throat – she could see that he was feeling unstable for a moment, but he was trying to regain his composure in front of his court.

“I expected a priest, not a whore.” He spoke, trying to sound powerful. Aisha could hear the underlying weakness in those words, while the others did not. Her face was cold like a stone, not giving him satisfaction of breaking down and asking for mercy, which was what he clearly expected – surrender. She chuckled unsmiling, which delivered a gooseflesh to the listeners.

“Armaro is dead.” She said shortly, seeing a flash of shock on the King’s face, and the faces of his advisors. Another muffled wave of whispers filled in the hall. Benedict raised his hand, covering his eyes for a moment.

“You needed an advisor – here I am. Accept the service or refuse the one, true God.” She continued with same toneless voice as before, accenting the last two words slightly louder, making them sound much stronger and convincing.

She felt the power flowing within her and she knew then, by just looking at him, that he wouldn’t refuse – he would bend his knee to her God. *One, true god.*

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Gwendis Blackmont – History of House Blackmont

With a heavy heart, Gwendis stood at the window, looking out of her room and down onto the lands of her family, a family that had just gotten smaller. It was uncharacteristically cold, as if the land itself mourned for its queen. Shivering, not entirely out of the cold, Gwendis tightly clenched her thick coat. It was black, like everything she wore today.

"I'm doing it!", Naemon's shaking voice sounded behind her. "I swear, this time I'm doing it!" Gwendis sighed and closed her eyes for a second. Usually, the sight from her window and down into the eerily beautiful lands below calmed her. Today, she found it hard to remain collected. The way the sun started to rise in the distance, its early rays hitting the mountain that gave her house its name, it reminded her of the Valaena Blackmont's pale beauty. The way the trees swayed gently in the breeze, it reminded her of her dark hair. The sky, slowly turning from blue to red, it reminded her of the purple eyes she inherited... The land itself seemed to wish to keep the memory of her mother alive, in the most painful way possible.

With a lump in her throat, she turned around. "Doing what?", she asked, as she spotted Naemon, standing in the middle of her room, his fists clenched, his lanky body trembling. During the past months, he had grown considerably and now he was finally taller than her, though that didn't mean he was any less of a child. So was Gwendis, as she reluctantly had to admit, but right now, she had to be the adult of the two.

"He can't force me!", Naemon spat, as he shook his head. Gwendis saw the tears forming in her little brother's eyes and she frowned. "Sit down", she ordered him and slowly, he complied, sitting down onto her bed. Gwendis walked up to him without turning around for another look out of the window.

As she sat next to him, she put a hand onto his back and noticed how he immediately tensed up. "What is it?", she asked again and her brother glanced at her, his eyes wet already. "It's Benedict", he growled and the cold way he spoke their father's name sent a shiver down Gwendis' spine. Benedict... was that where they were standing at now?

"Father", she corrected him gently, though he did not react to it. "He just told me whom I'm going to squire for", Naemon spat and Gwendis raised an eyebrow. "Not Uncle Vorian, I presume?", she asked. She didn't want to tease him, not in this situation. It simply came out of her mouth and in a strange way, she felt better, if only slightly, as it distracted of how she truly felt.

Naemon shook his head. "Lord Blackadder", he revealed glumly. Gwendis affectionately patted his back. "Lord Blackadder is a war hero", she tried to cheer him up. "During the Battle of the Wide Way, he lead the charge that crushed the Storm King's heavy cavalry. He personally killed a dozen knights on that day"

"He is seventy years old and he stinks", Naemon interjected. "And the battle was fifty years ago. Who cares for that now?" Gwendis paused and tried to smile at her brother. But even that felt wrong today. "He does indeed stink", she admitted.

"Benedict can't do that!", Naemon protested. Of course he can, Gwendis knew it. Naemon was eight years old and the crown prince. Father wouldn't tolerate disobedience in this matter. "What are you going to do?", she asked.

"I'm leaving", Naemon proclaimed, with all the pride of an eight-year old boy who just made a decision he deemed important. "I'm taking our fastest horse and I'm riding down the Torrentine to Starfall. I'm going to live with Uncle Vorian from now on and with Malcolm. Even with Jamison if that means I'm getting away from here"

Against all odds, Gwendis' mouth formed a small smirk of disbelief. "You're not going to do anything like that", she said softly, but sternly. "The stable master will notice that a horse is missing and then they will notice that you're missing. An hour later, they will catch you" Naemon shook his head. "Not if I'm going to pay the stable master for his silence", he said slyly and Gwendis rose an eyebrow. "Paying him?", she asked. "Now how do you want to do that?"

Now, a weak, grief-stricken grin appeared on Naemon's face. He opened his palm, revealing the brooch in it. It was golden, with a single ruby in the middle, as large as a human eye, shimmering as if a light was shining inside of it. Gwendis inhaled sharply. "Where do you got that from?", she asked with a hint of anger in her voice and Naemon shrugged. "Mother's room", he said casually and Gwendis immediately rose from the bed. Only narrowly did she suppress the urge to slap him.

"You want to give mother's jewelry to the stable master?", she snapped at him and Naemon gave her a confused look. "Yes", he said with hesitation. "It's what she would have wanted. She wouldn't have wanted me to remain here, with the man who..." Gwendis cut him off by grabbing the brooch from his hand.

"Give that to me!", she barked. "I can't believe it... That is not what mother would have wanted! Do you have any idea what that is?" Instantly, she felt bad for scolding him. He had no idea what he had done wrong. She was just a year older, but in moments like this, Gwendis felt almost like a second mother to him. "A... brooch?", he asked.

Gwendis shook her head. "Not just a simple brooch", she explained, still sternly, but a lot softer than before. "Mother wore it, grandmother wore it and her mother before" She held it

up so that he could easily see it. "It's a symbol of our greatest triumph, taken from the Hightower's treasury" Naemon's empty face proved to her that he had no idea what she was walking about. "When Barragan Blackmont sacked Oldtown together with Samwell Dayne?", she tried it again and he still had no idea what she was talking about.

In frustration, Gwendis groaned. "Has Maester Mortin taught you anything about our house? Anything at all?", she asked and Naemon shrugged. "Maester Mortin has told me many things", he said indifferently. "Doesn't mean I have to listen. He's boring"

Gwendis rolled her eyes, though she had to admit that Naemon wasn't entirely wrong. There were more interesting things to do for a boy his age than listening to Maester Mortin. "You're the crown prince of Blackmont", she reminded him. "You have to know more about our family if you want to lead one day"

"But I don't want to lead!", Naemon protested and Gwendis sat down next to him again. "You're the only one that can. You are Benedict Blackmont's heir", she said and her little brother sighed. "It should have been you", he complained. Quietly, Gwendis gave him a nod. "It should have", she agreed. "But it's not. I know it's hard, I know it's unfair and I know you don't want to, but you have to" She raised the brooch again and saw a sting of guilt appearing on Naemon's face. "And because of that, you have to know why you can't go around stealing family heirlooms. You have to know about their importance, you have to know about our history", she explained. "Do you know anything about our house? How it got founded for example?"

The look on Naemon's face changed subtly. Instead of the sorrow and loss, she saw mild annoyance and that was a good thing. It helped him to ease his mind. Naemon always had a strong imagination and what he came up with after their mother died... Gwendis didn't even want to think about it. And this helped her. Keeping her mind preoccupied. Not thinking about what they had lost.

"The first Blackmont was raised by vultures...", Naemon started and Gwendis shook her head. "Vulture's don't raise human children. They're birds of prey", she corrected him. "Who told you that story?" Naemon bit his lower lip and gave her a sheepish look. "Ser Kegan", he answered and Gwendis smiled. "Knowing Ser Kegan, he probably believes it himself", she said. "Maester Mortin tells a different story"

"Maester Mortin tells a boring story", Naemon argued, but Gwendis silenced him. "He tells the truth. Besides, this one is not boring", she said. "It's a very dark story" Immediately, she

saw Naemon giving her a curious look. Gwendis herself wasn't fond of this story, but for his sake, she would tell him regardless. Anything so that he would forget just for a little while.

"It happened long ago, during the Age of Heroes. Out of all the houses of Dorne, only House Dayne is older", she explained. "Back then, these lands were ruled by the kings of House Faren" She saw Naemon's confused look. "I have never heard of House Faren before", he said and Gwendis gave him a nod. "Precisely", she answered. "The last King Faren was a cruel, greedy man, a king in name only and jealous of those who had more than him. Over the years, his family had lost most of their riches and the only thing he was truly proud of were his sons, five newborn children, healthy and strong"

"And what does that have to do with House Blackmont?", Naemon asked impatiently and Gwendis sternly raised her finger. "The man who would become the first Blackmont was a farmer in service of King Faren. He came from a rich family, richer than the king's and his house was more like a keep, larger and stronger than the king's", she continued. "It stood right here, where our castle is located today. The farmer had five sons, like the king, but his were even stronger and he loved them dearly"

"So, the king was jealous of him?", Naemon deduced and Gwendis gave him a nod. "Very much so", she answered. "He demanded of the farmer to give him half of his gold, half of his grain and half of his cattle. The farmer refused and then, in his wounded pride, the king did something terrible. He took four of the farmer's sons and sent only their heads back to their father, telling him that he would take the fifth son as well if he would have to wait any longer"

"And what did the farmer do?", Naemon asked and Gwendis pressed her lips together. "Something equally terrible", she answered. "With the help of his last living son, he snuck into the king's seat and abducted all five of his children. He left behind only a letter, telling the king to come and take them back all alone. He gave him five days and told him that on the fifth, his line would end"

By now she noticed how her brother was listening carefully. She had rarely seen him listening with such a level of attention. "The king waited. He thought the farmer would only bluff and he was afraid for his life if he would meet him alone in his house", she continued. "But the farmer wasn't bluffing. On the evening of the first day, he slaughtered a sheep in front of his house, he lay one of the king's sons onto the carcass and he waited for the carrion-eaters. The last thing King Faren saw before the sun set was his son carried away by a vulture"

She paused and shivered as she thought of the gruesome story. Maester Mortin had told it to her when she had been six years old and it had caused her nightmares for days. When the memory of her mother softly rocking her to sleep flashed through her mind, she continued to speak. "King Faren waited four days and each day, he lost a son. On the fifth, the worry for his remaining son had grown stronger than his cowardice and he went to the farmer's house, alone"

"What happened then?", Naemon asked and Gwendis sighed. "The farmer cut King Faren's throat and fed him to the vultures that helped him achieve his vengeance", she said to get it over with. Naemon gulped. "And... the king's last son?", he asked.

This time Gwendis hesitated. Though she was only a year older, she considered herself far more of an adult than her brother, who was only a child. "That has been lost to history", she lied. "After Faren's line was ended, the farmer remained in his house, turning it into a formidable keep. After killing the king, the people stayed away from him and the mountain he lived on was known as the 'Black Mountain' ever since, or Blackmont as it was soon called by the smallfolk"

"So, the first Blackmont was a bad man?", Naemon deduced and Gwendis shook her head. "He was a man who had no mercy for his enemies", she explained. "But when winter came and the smallfolk were starving, he opened the gates to his keep, invited them to his table and generously shared his supplies with them. When spring came, they named him their king and they loved him. House Blackmont has ruled over these lands ever since and our kings have been among the most powerful in Dorne"

She hesitated a little bit too long to continue her story and noticed that Naemon's thoughts drifted off to the matter she hoped to get out of his head. His expression grew darker again. "And how many Blackmont kings have dabbled in black magic?", he asked with a voice that had a far too bitter streak for such a young boy. "How many of them have murdered their own wife?"

Gwendis closed her eyes. "None", she said firmly. "Not even father" Naemon glared at her. "And how can you know that?", he spat. "Mother has been fine before we left for Starfall! You know Benedict never wanted us to leave. How can you know for sure that he had nothing to do with her death?"

Memories flashed through Gwendis' mind. A kind, warm smile, strong arms that lifted her up, sitting on his shoulders and slowly falling asleep on them, how she always woke up when he

put her into her bed, no matter how gentle he tried to be. "Gwen?", Naemon asked. Once she opened her eyes again, sadness was visible in them. "I just know", she said.

Naemon averted his eyes and Gwendis put a hand onto his shoulder. "Are you afraid of him?", she asked and he gave her a nod. "Don't be. Always remember, you're a Blackmont" As she spoke she put her arm around her brother's shoulder. "And what if he kills me next?", Naemon asked, obvious fear in his high-pitched voice.

"We conquer the Heavens", she said the words of their house. "These words were meant to intimidate, back in the days when even the Yronwoods feared us. But they are more than just a threat and a boast" Her hand softly caressed his cheek, wiping away the tears that continued to pour down his face. "They are meant to encourage. A man who is ready to conquer the heavens fears nothing", she reminded him. "Nothing at all in the whole world. Especially not his own father"

"But he...", Naemon protested, though Gwendis cut him off. "He is your father. You're from his line", she said. "But you're also from the line of Barragan Blackmont, who almost burned the entire city of Oldtown to the ground, together with Samwell Dayne. Firebrand, they called him, just like Samwell was known as the Starfire" She raised the brooch in her hand. "He took this gem and a thousand more from the vaults of the Hightower, in exchange for the lives of Lord Hightower's family. When he returned to Dorne, he took Starfire's sister as his queen and he gave her this brooch, the most beautiful gem in Dorne", she explained. "Ever since, House Dayne has been a friend in need"

Naemon's head hung low and Gwendis continued. "You're from the line of Torrhen Blackmont, who resisted the Andals longer than all the other houses of Dorne. When Dayne and even Yronwood had already submitted to the foreign warlords, he was still fighting and he only laid down his arms when they gave him an Andal princess as his bride"

"You're from the line of Ynis Blackmont, who picked up her father's sword after he got killed in battle. While her brothers were too wounded to even stand, she led the fight against the Manwoody invaders until they retreated to Kingsgrave", she reminded him of her favourite story. "Her bravery on that day spared all of Blackmont the tyranny of House Manwoody"

Still sensing Naemon's fear as if it was her own, she decided to mention his favourite story, one of the few where he even listened to Maester Mortin. "And you're from the line of Andros the Kingsbane, who killed two Storm Kings in a single battle and came closer to end Durran's line than even the gods ever did", she spoke. "You come from a line of fearsome

warriors, noble knights and wise rulers. One day, you're going to be all three, warrior, knight, ruler" Still a hand on Naemon's cheek, she looked him in the eyes. "And you will not be afraid of your own father"

Slowly, the look on Naemon's face changed. He was still very much a scared little boy, mourning for his mother, but she saw a hint of the determination she tried her best to feel as well right now. "Then what do you think I should do now?", he asked, his voice still a bit weak from the crying. Gwendis forced herself to smile at him. "You go to father and you tell him you don't want to squire for Lord Blackadder", she advised him. "And if he still sends me there?", Naemon asked. "Then you follow his wish", Gwendis answered.

Naemon gave her a look as if she was out of her mind. "Because he is such a loving father?", he asked with bitterness. Gwendis shook her head. "Because you are our future ruler. Because you have a duty not to him, but to your family. To every Blackmont since the days of the first king of the Black Mountain. To Barragan and Torrhen and Ynis and Andros", she answered and waited a second before she continued. "You don't want to, but you have to. If I could, then I would do it in your place"

Finally, Naemon gave in. "I'm doing it", he said, not in the stubborn, defiant tone he spoke with at the beginning of their talk, but humbly, almost defeated. Gwendis smiled at him, though she felt no joy. He shouldn't be forced to do all these things and she shouldn't be forced to stay away from them. "But I'm not doing it for all of these people", Naemon said as he rose from the bed. "They don't matter to me" Gwendis looked up and their eyes met. "I'm doing it for you"

His words shattered the carefully constructed walls Gwendis tried to hide her feelings behind. Her smile grew weaker, though the look in her eyes was thankful. Wordlessly, she handed Naemon the brooch and he looked at it. "I'm going to bring it back to mother's room", he said and his voice shivered as he said the final two words. "And then I will go to our father and I will tell him I am not afraid of him. I will squire for Lord Blackadder and when I return, I will be a better knight than Benedict ever was!"

"Then conquer the heavens", Gwendis said in a gentle tone. "Show him your worth" Naemon smiled at her and his smile looked more convincing than her's. "I will. See you soon, Gwen", he answered and turned around. He was already halfway through her room, when he stopped. "It's just..." His voice sounded glum and mournful again. "I just wish mother could be here... to see me becoming a knight, the best knight in Dorne, and..."

While Naemon spoke, Gwendis glanced to the window of her room. The lands of Blackmont as far as she could see, the almost purple sky, the cold wind gently whispering through the dark trees below. "And I wish she could see you, Gwen", Naemon said. "She'd be so proud"

And in that moment, it all came crashing down. Gwendis wished she could be stronger, she wished she could conquer the heavens on her own, could be brave like Ynis, or strong like Barragan. But she wasn't, not now. Maybe she shouldn't. Right now, she simply felt like the nine-years old girl she was. Tears welled up in her eyes as Gwendis turned towards her brother. "Oh Naemon", she whispered with a shaky, tearful voice and almost fell into his open arms, as they gently wrapped around her. "I miss her as well, I miss her so much..."

The sun fully rose, shining upon a Castle Blackmont that felt more empty than before, now that its queen was gone. Clinging to her brother and crying into his shoulder without restraint, Gwendis knew that the proudest history couldn't change that she felt more alone than ever.

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Missy - The Epiphany of Madness

The sky was black, like it was blotched with ink when she arrived at the courtyard. The eyes stared at her from the darkness, arms reaching out into the moonlight that lit the court, trying to pull her into the shadows. She avoided them, embracing the night light.

The courtyard was barren, with dead trees and a small dry fountain in the centre. Within that fountain were a few small puddles of water, to which she peered into. She saw a ghost staring back at her. It wore face paint, like that of a skull, yet the heat had started to make it run. She was horrid.

Missy smirked, staring into the reflection of herself. A short giggle broke from her lips, and she fought hard not to burst into a loudly amused cackle. Instead, she grasped the dry wooden shaft of the guard's spear, her palms sweaty.

The blood of the man's spear had dried in the heat, but the sweat on her hands kept the blood thick and wet. She sickly smiled at the sight of it, bringing her hands to her lips and tasting the liquid. Satisfied, she turned back to her patient companion in the puddles, she stared at her with curiosity and interest.

“Did I ever tell you the truth about freedom?” She asked, her voice soft and somewhat flirtatious. The mirror reflection shook her head, remaining silent. “Tell me.” She said with intrigue, causing Missy to smirk at her.

She turned her eyes to the black sky, a light stood out in the darkness. The white ball that sang to her a special tune, the light that unleashed her. She felt a tingling in her chest, she grinned and licked her bloody fingers, turning back to her partner.

“Freedom is a lie.” Missy blurted, almost disappointed. “Peasants don’t have it, nor do kings. Wives don’t have it, and men wish they had it. We do things to make us feel free, but none of us are truly free. Not unless you’re like me.” The girl looked up to Missy, her skin starting to show beneath the melting paint.

“Like you? You’re a slave to a mad king.” The girl mocked, shaking her head ignorantly. Missy grinned in response, accepting the taunt.

“Mad king? Madness is the true freedom, an epiphany which none have come to understand.” Missy stated warmly, playing with the tip of the bloody spear. “And Albin is no mere king, girl. Albin is a god, the God.” Missy smirked at the girl’s sudden confusion.

“The Seven are your gods... The Father, the Mother, the-” Missy laughed hysterically, off putting the girl. She shook her head, smiling at the girl.

“The Seven are a lie, used by men to control the weak and innocent. I do not let men control me, I’m free. Albin unleashed me from the chains of man, the chains of reality.” The girl stared at Missy for a while, raising her eyebrow.

“Then you admit you’re sick?” Missy sliced her finger along the edge of the sharp steel, adding her blood to the guard’s. She turned to the girl, disgusted.

“I’m not sick.” Missy yelled, defending herself, her voice echoed through the yard. She lowered her voice to a whisper, almost a mutter. “You see this as a curse, like I’m falling into a never-ending void of darkness. Like I have no control.” The girl nodded, and Missy simply smiled and shook her head, releasing a short giggle.

“What you call madness unbinds me, unleashes me. I am the fall, I am the darkness.” Missy stated, lifting her finger to her lips and sucking out the blood. The girl sighed, frowning.

“Then you are truly lost.” She said, almost as if she was disappointed. Missy shook her head once again.

"No, I'm found." With her words, she spun around and found a girl staring at her. The blonde girl looked at her with disgust in her eyes, her tone was spiteful.

"Who are you talking to?" She asked, her voice full of confidence and ignorance. Missy took a step towards her, spear in hand, the girl remained still with a brave smile. "You can't hurt me." She said confidently, as if she truly believed it herself.

"What's your name, girl?" Missy asked, smirking at her. The girl giggled to herself, shaking her head. "I don't give my name to filth like you." She muttered, gazing elsewhere. Missy smiled, lowering the spear and walking closer to her.

"Is that so?" Missy asked, throwing her spear in front of her. The weapon rolled across the stone floor, stopping before the girl's feet. The cocky girl looked at the spear, and then at Missy.

"Who were you talking to?" She demanded, her tone irritable and impatient. Missy smiled, though before she could say another word, she heard a collective of footsteps.

The once quiet yard now buzzed with fuelled hatred, as a wave of guards flooded the court. Anger was in the men's eyes, their swords unsheathed and their glares piercing. *They found him.* Missy thought, instantly changing moods.

Missy backed away from the girl, turning fearful and pointing her bloody hands at the confused girl. The guards stared at her with just as much confusion, while Missy started to scream.

"Please!" Missy started, a genuine sounding fear in her tone. "She has a weapon, she killed a guard and cut me." Missy yelled, pulling her bloody hands close. The guards looked at the girl with anger. The girl turned her angry glare to Missy, clenching her fists.

"You bitch! You lying filthy whore!" She turned her gaze to the guards, backing away from Missy. "I am innocent, I swear!" The guards exchanged looks before turning their gazes to the shaking Missy, fearful and in tears. Silence filled the court for a moment, until when guard stepped forward.

"It's her!" One yelled, pointing at the girl as he slowly approaching her. "The handmaiden who spoke shit behind ol' Ronny's back. Now she killed my brother." The guard stopped before her, smirking. "Tryin' to escape bitch? I'd say Ron wouldn't mind a couple of words with you." The guard said with a sick grin, the girl stood frozen still, in clear shock.

The men grabbed her, dragging her away as her angry screams echoed through the castle walls. The melodic sounds lingered in the air until silence reappeared. Missy lowered her head, cackling at herself. She turned back to the puddle, the girl looking at her with disgust. Missy grinned.

“See? I’m free.”

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Naemon Blackmont – Knighthood

It was true what they said, every man had a weakness. More than one, in most cases. During the tourneys he had attended, during the duels he had fought, Naemon had learned that this was especially true for knights. He had fought against knights who were strong, but too slow to land a hit. He had fought against knights who were fast, but who barely managed to lift a proper sword, even less so to land a hit that actually hurt.

Even men like his cousin Jamison, undoubtedly strong and fast as Naemon begrudgingly had to admit, had their flaws. Their biggest one was overconfidence in their skills. They were unaware of their weaknesses or consciously refused to see them and their arrogance was a weakness in itself. Of course, Naemon freely admitted that he was not without flaws either. In his case, his biggest weakness were redheads.

One particularly fine example of a redhead sat right next to him in this very moment, on the large, luxurious settee in the centre of his room and Naemon found it hard to focus in her presence. Her name was Anya and she was Blackmont's newest stable girl, as well as the prettiest by far. Her hair was shimmering like molten copper in the light of the candles that brightly illuminated the room. Her light blue eyes were shining in a breathtaking way whenever she laughed, so Naemon had made it his personal mission to make her laugh as often as possible. Add to that a delicate, slightly freckled nose and Naemon had to admit that he had a serious crush on her, at least for this evening. The wine would do the rest, it was a sweet, but strong bottle imported from the Arbor, as delicious as it was expensive.

“Well, don't you want to answer the question?”, another voice, soft and female, sounded and Naemon sighed, as he stopped to admire Anya's beauty and instead focussed on his *other* weakness, looking at him from the armchair across the small table. She was not less easy on the eyes, arguably even more so, but unfortunately she was related to him. And like the

good big sister she was, Gwendis naturally decided to make things as complicated as possible for him tonight. It was not that Anya was a very complicated person, quite the contrary to be honest, but unfortunately for him, Gwendis could be very, very complicated in situations like this.

"Forgive me, sweet sister", Naemon said. "I was busy with admiring my beautiful company" He gave Anya a wink and the stable girl blushed. "My... my prince", she gasped and her eyes shined happily. Gwendis meanwhile simply rolled her own eyes with slight annoyance. "Smooth, brother. Charming even", she said and reached down for her cup, filled with Naemon's expensive wine. "Though you used the same excuse the last three times" She took a sip from her cup and smirked.

"The last three times?", Anya asked. "How... how many times do you... you know...?" Naemon gulped and a smile that was as apologetic as it was charming formed on his face. "I am an admirer of beauty", he said and stared daggers at his sister. Gwendis chuckled, obviously finding his struggles highly amusing. "That is a very polite way of putting it", she answered.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Naemon saw that Anya was obviously confused by their little exchange. Well, he had not taken an interest in her for her intelligence. A confident smile formed on his face. "Mylady, have I ever told you about knighthood?", he asked, in the attempt to change the topic.

Immediately, Gwendis rolled her purple eyes. "Here we go again", she sighed and Naemon glared at her. "If you don't want to hear it, you can always leave", he said, though Gwendis shook her head. "Oh, there's no way I'm going to miss this", she said and reached for the bottle, filling her cup until it was almost overflowing, with Naemon's wine. "Just, probably not entirely sober"

"Right", Naemon mumbled, before he smiled at Anya. "So, what do you know about knights?" The young woman gave him an insecure smile and she looked stunning while doing so. "Not... not much, my prince", she stuttered. "They are warriors"

Naemon shook his head. "A common misinterpretation", he corrected her gently. "Knights are, first and foremost, defenders. A warrior's purpose is to fight. A defender's purpose meanwhile is to protect" He made a large handwave. "Women, children, the innocent, everyone in need", he proclaimed and he meant what he said. "This is a knight's duty. It's his true calling"

"But... can't a warrior fight to protect others as well?", Anya asked and Gwendis raised an eyebrow in a slightly impressed way. "You know, I like her", she said. "She brings up some good points" Naemon gave her a nod. "Yes, that's true", he answered. "But at heart, every fight of a true warrior ends with the death of his opponent. Protecting others comes second"

He glanced down at his own glass of wine, but decided against drinking more, at least for now. "Killing someone is not always knightly", he told her. "A true knight must consider every fight individually. This is his duty, he has been charged to be just in the name of the Father" Mentioning one of the Seven had the effect he aimed for and Anya's eyes widened with astonishment. "So, not every knight is just?", she asked and Naemon smiled. "If every knight would be truly just, then the world would be a far better place", he answered. "Sadly, there are only a selected few who follow this principle and who can rightfully consider themselves true knights"

"You do?", Anya asked and this time, Naemon gave her a proud nod. "Ever since I was knighted, two years ago", he said and noticed Gwendis' smirk. "Don't you dare", he whispered into her direction. He knew, she'd bring up the ceremony, which had honestly been a mess. After Father had forbidden him to squire for his uncle, Vorian Dayne, he ended up squiring for the elderly Lord Tomard Blackadder, who had already been unable to hold his water by then. He frowned as he remembered the terrible smell of the late lord, whose bladder had been the only thing even weaker than his brain in his final years.

Audibly, he cleared his throat and as he glanced at Anya, she gave him a coy grin. "But yes, I think I may call myself a just man". The thought of being a just king one day sent shivers down his spine. "That said, I consider myself as brave as I am just", he boasted to change the topic. "After all, I was charged to be brave, in the name of the warrior"

"I remember a story of particular bravery", Gwendis mentioned and Naemon glanced at her. "It was shortly after he lost his first tournament at the tender age of sixteen. He was good, but his seventh opponent during the tourney was Jamison Dayne" Now Naemon narrowed his eyes. "I think Lady Anya would rather hear how I unhorsed the previous six"

He glanced at the girl and, to his annoyance, noticed an all too familiar expression. "Jamison Dayne?", she asked with a gasp and Naemon sighed. "Yeah, cousin Jamison. He's really not that impressive", he claimed and Gwendis shook her head. "Well, he unhorsed you, with relative ease, as I must add" Naemon narrowed his eyes. "He got lucky", he insisted.

"The Sword of the Night...", Anya said awestruck and Naemon sent a glare towards Gwendis for even mentioning him. "And you faced him out of your own free will?" Slowly, Naemon gave her a nod and he noticed how impressed she was. "By the Seven, this is so brave", she gasped and now, a smirk formed on his face. "As I said, I was charged to be brave", he answered.

"Yes, crying tears of bravery after your first defeat", Gwendis chuckled, though thankfully she had lowered her voice and Anya wasn't paying enough attention to her. "Brave, just...", the young stable girl said. "Does that mean you are a true knight?"

"Yes and no, sweet Anya", Naemon said and as he grinned at her, she blushed delicately. "I am a true knight, but not only because I am brave and just" A feeling of pride went through him and his confident smile met Gwendis' expression of playful mockery. "At least as true as Uncle Vorian", he added. "Don't you agree, Gwen?"

"I don't think anyone can be as much a true knight as Uncle Vorian", Gwendis answered, which was something Naemon actually had to agree with. Then, her expression grew more serious. "But you are on a good way", she admitted. "Say, why don't you tell her the story about your encounter on the road to Gravesend?"

Her suggestion took Naemon by surprise. It was not a story he usually brought up, but at the same time, it was not a story he was ashamed of, quite the contrary. It was simply a story he never thought anyone else could find interesting. Well, aside from Gwendis of course, who never grew tired of it. For a moment, he looked at her, trying to determine if this was one of her games, though he quickly realized that she was actually serious about her request. He was sure of this, since he knew her better than anyone else.

"I believe Anya would like to hear a story of you actually being a true knight", she said. "Not of you being second best at some tourney. Say, is it required of a knight to fight in tournaments?" Naemon shook his head, which slightly confused Anya. "But... isn't every knight out to win glory?", she asked. "To achieve great victories?"

This time, Naemon gave her a smile. "Many knights are only living such a life for the glory, it's true", he admitted. He hid the fact that he himself appreciated this glory as well. "They fight on tournaments, march to war. But in doing so, many of them loose track of what a knight is truly meant to be"

He smirked as he stretched his arms, only to subtly put his left one around her shoulders. She did not tense up under his touch, which was a good sign. "There is more than one

definition of a great victory. And knights, they are defenders", he explained. "They defend the young and innocent in the name of the Mother and women in the name of the Maiden"

He noticed that he had her undivided attention by now. "But I don't wish to bore you, mylady", he said. "I have quite a number of stories to tell about knighthood, so why don't you choose. There's the story Gwendis mentioned, but I could also tell you of the tourney at Skyreach"

"In which you became second, after Jamison of course", Gwendis said. "I doubt anyone wishes to hear how you got knocked into the dust by your own cousin" A smirk flashed across her face. "Admittedly, I can't get enough of it, but I'm not the focus of your attention right now. Why don't we let Anya decide?"

Under Gwendis' questioning stare, Anya gulped, but when his sister showed her charming smile, the stable girl relaxed again. "I... I think the story you mentioned sounds interesting. About the road to Gravesend", she said and Gwendis' smile got wider. "You got a precious one there, brother", she complimented him. "I don't think I can remember anyone else ever choosing this over one of your tournament stories"

"You did", Naemon reminded her and Gwendis gave him a nod, drinking another sip from the painfully expensive wine. "Yeah, but I'm special", she said with a wink. "The wine is splendid, by the way, don't you agree, Anya?"

The young woman looked up and at Gwendis' confident smile. She blushed again, before she reciprocated the smile, although thin and shy. "It's the best I ever had, my princess", she mumbled and Naemon whistled gently to regain her attention. "Alright, it's story time", he said.

Once he was sure that Anya was listening and Gwendis was silent for once, he started to speak. "It happened slightly over a year ago. I just turned seventeen and returned from my second tourney, the one at Uplands in the Reach", he explained. "I had passed through Gravesend the day before and was currently looking for a place to spend the night. It was dark and rainy, the wind howled through the mountains and after a scalding day, the night was chillingly cold"

Naemon leant forwards. "That's where I heard it. Faintly in the distance, a desperate cry for help", he whispered and Anya looked up. "I immediately turned my horse into the direction of the cries and rushed to find their source. After a short while, I spotted three figures, each of them holding crude weapons, slowly beating the live out of a fourth figure on the ground,

who was merely able to whimper. The three saw me coming of course, my sword drawn, charging at them. Gotta admit, they were smart, because as soon as I came closer, they ran away”

“So you chased them down?”, Anya asked and Naemon shook his head. “I let them go”, he said and she seemed confused by his answer. “No, really, I did not chase them. Instead, I rather stayed with the woman they had been beating almost to death. She was barely conscious and would have died if I wouldn't have stayed with her”

Finally, she understood and her eyes widened. “You rather saved her live”, she realized. Naemon nodded with pride. “Indeed. That's what a knight should do”, he explained. “It's not so much about killing others, it's about defending those in need. The young, the innocent, women and children”

“And this woman you saved, she survived?”, Anya asked and Naemon smiled. “She's fine”, he assured her. “Even better, so is her child. When I turned her around to inspect her wounds, I realized she had been shielding a young boy from these men. As fast as I could, I brought both of them back to Blackmont, where Maester Mortin tended to their wounds”

Naemon and Gwendis exchanged a look and his sister smiled at him. “Once she got better, we learned that she came from Oakswood and tried to run to her family at Gravesend, to escape from a soldier that abused her. The man and his friends caught up and they had every intention of killing her, at least until my little brother arrived and they saw the sigil on his armour”, she explained. “Later on, I arranged for her to be brought to Gravesend, to her family and far away from the bastard that hurt her. Last time I heard of her, she married a cobbler who treats her well. But without Naemon, she would have died back then”

When Naemon looked back at Anya, he noticed the look of awe in her eyes. “So, this is what a true knight is about”, she stated and he gave her a nod. “Far better than the Sword of the Night, eh?”, he asked and she gave him an enthusiastic nod. “Much better”, she agreed quickly.

Now, Naemon chuckled. “That's not to say my cousin or the others are bad knights. A man can be a knight without aspiring for true knighthood”, he explained. “But an endless wave of tournament, one bloody war after the other, that's not what it should be about. At heart, I believe a knight should focus less on killing and more on saving”

“It's a good thing that you don't even like killing”, Gwendis said and Naemon glanced at her. From the smirk on her face, even he had a hard time reading her and he was not sure if it

was subtle mockery, or genuine appreciation. Quickly, he decided for the latter. He knew Gwendis' own views on this and how they aligned with his own.

That said, he wisely decided to remain silent about it. Just now, he had Anya exactly where he wanted her to be, awestruck at him, the hero. She'd be disappointed to learn that his story was only half of the truth. It was true that he remained behind to help the woman and everything he told her was his deepest conviction. Saving a life was always more important than taking one.

However, he also stayed with her to avoid killing the men that tormented her. In fact, he abhorred the very thought. It was one thing to fight straw men, but fighting a human being, flesh and blood to the death, that was something else entirely. And despite all of his training, he never got to the point where he could believe that all men were made of straw. The thought of actually ending a human life, it was the source of nightmares for him. Naemon had no doubt that this was decidedly less heroic.

As he looked back at Anya, his smile had grown thinner, though she did not seem to mind. The way she looked at him, it caused his heart to beat faster and he could have lost himself in her eyes right now, just like he had lost himself in so many eyes before. His confidence was strong, though her beauty was even stronger and his smile grew nervous. "So... I, uh, hope my story has not bored you. It's not one I usually tell"

"Why not?", she cut him off and he noticed that she had grown slightly bolder by now, a streak he appreciated. "Ah, I have made the experience that most people find it rather boring, compared to my other stories", he explained. "They prefer to hear how I unhorsed four men during the joust of the tournament at Starfall, or defeated half a dozen during the melee of the tournament at Skyreach. This one lacks fights and blood and danger. It's not what others expect of a knight"

"I believe you have been very heroic", Anya said, before her eyes widened, as she noticed that she had forgotten something. "My prince" Naemon smiled. "Naemon", he offered and she gave him a nod. "Naemon", she agreed.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw movement. Even though he wanted to remain focussed on Anya for the rest of the night, he turned his head, to see that Gwendis had raised from her chair. She had been drinking a lot of his wine, especially for a woman of her physique, but she stood remarkably steadfast and the look she gave him was clear and almost sober. "I believe I should leave you two alone", she stated.

Now it was up to Naemon to grin. He could have let her go without a further word, but after the way she had made things harder for him the entire night, he just had to comment on the situation. "Oh, what is it, Gwenny? Are you jealous?", he asked and slyly raised an eyebrow. "Or do you see anything you like?"

Gwendis glanced at Anya only slightly longer than necessary, before she slowly shook her head. "Hardly", she stated, though Naemon noticed that her smile had grown considerably less confident. Not wanting to torment his sister any further, he gave her a nod. "It was nice having you here tonight, Gwendis", he said wholeheartedly and she nodded. "Of course. You're lucky to have me", she stated, before she turned around and walked to the door. "Close the door!", Naemon yelled after her.

Of course she left it widely open. Naemon rolled his eyes, before he looked back at Anya. "I'm back in a minute", he said and she gave him a quick nod, still staring at him in awe. She was quite something that she liked this story so much, he had to admit it. Most women preferred to hear of his victories against other knights. Gwendis was an exception, the only one he had met until tonight.

"My sweet sister", he proclaimed loudly, to make sure she'd hear him out in the hallway. "The beautiful princess of Blackmont. Brilliantly bright, a model of decency, with impeccable manners" He made sure that his compliments sounded particularly hammy, as he put his hands on both side of the doorframe, to lean out of it and to glance to his right. Gwendis had stopped a few feet away, her back turned towards him. "Unable to close a fucking door", he chuckled.

Gwendis glanced over her shoulder and their gazes met. "Enjoy your beautiful company", she said in a jovial tone and Naemon raised an eyebrow. "Try not to think too much about my beautiful company", he answered with a wide grin. A sly smirk formed on Gwendis' face. "Sleep well, Naemon", she said and he gave her a nod. "See you tomorrow Gwen", he answered.

Feeling especially cheerful, as well as glad to finally have some privacy, Naemon stepped back into his room, closing the door behind him and locking it, just to be sure that they wouldn't be disturbed. Then, with an eager look on his face, he turned around again. "Well then", he said. "Where were we?"

Forovos Norvoshi – The Origin of the Keyholder

The room was dimly lit with a few hanging lanterns, Forovos stood over the desk of tools. A variety of blades were laying on the table, ranging from scalpels and needles to daggers and dirks. Forovos turned his gaze to the man in the chair behind him, who stared back at Forovos with fearless eyes.

“You followed me here. You’ve been following me for a while, am I right?” Forovos asked, grabbing a scalpel from the table. The man remained silent, though did not break eye contact with Forovos.

Forovos walked towards the man, pulling a stool for himself to sit on. He kept his distance, despite knowing the man was bound to the chair. Down Forovos’ line of work, he had seen a lot of tricks up assassin’s sleeves, he’d witnessed them first hand.

Forovos sat himself on the stool, taking in a deep breath and observing the man’s features. He was a skinny man, though Forovos knew there was strength to him that couldn’t be seen by an untrained eye. His hair was short and dirty, and his black eyes stared into an endless void, which was in Forovos’ general direction. He had once worn plain rugged robes until Forovos had stripped him of that benefit.

“I know who you are.” Forovos calmly stated, playing with the tip of the scalpel. “There’s no need to withdraw from me.” His words were calm and confident, yet not persuasive enough to convince the assassin to speak. Forovos sighed, leaning forward on his knees, spinning the blade between his hands.

“I can only see two ways this will end for you. One, you tell me what I need to know and I give you a quick death.” Forovos caught the assassin’s eyes flicker to the ground, he continued. “Or, I simply cut the answers out of you. So I’ll ask again, why have you been following me?” Silence lingered in the air after Forovos spoke his words, and disappointment filled his chest.

He had wanted to avoid violence, though his own safety was prioritized the highest, and executing the man without answers was further endangering himself. Forovos sighed and stood from his stool, adjusting his grip on the handle of the corroding steel blade scalpel. As Forovos approached the man, he noticed a trickle of sweat run down his brow, his eyes lifted. Still fearless.

"You betrayed our order." The man muttered, glaring directly into Forovos' eyes. Forovos nodded, stopping before him.

"I did, and I was punished accordingly. That doesn't explain why you're here." The man scowled at Forovos, spitting at his feet. Forovos ignored the useless intimidation, the man would not provoke him.

"Go to hell." The man spat, lowering his eyes. Forovos smiled, taking a step closer to him. He could feel the shuddering breaths of the young man, each was agonizing for him. His body was bruised and bloody from the beating he endured, and it was clear that he was finished. *His choice.*

"I'm already there, assassin. The mistake you made was following me there, and now you will suffer until you give me what I want." Without hesitation, Forovos drove the scalpel into the man's shoulder. He winced, gritting his teeth, though that was all the reaction that Forovos received. He raised his eyes, smirking at Forovos.

"You'll have to do better than that, traitor." He said, and Forovos grinned in reply, freeing the scalpel from the man's shoulder.

"Is that an offer?" Forovos asked mockingly, slapping the assassin with the back of his hand. A bloody chuckle was the reward Forovos received next, to which he returned with a clenched fist. His punch was hard and direct, catching the man in the lower jaw. The sheer force of the blow knocked the chair backwards. The assassin laughed, spitting out the teeth and blood from his mouth.

"You're shit at torturing, you know that?" His words were slurred, and there was pain beneath them. Forovos smiled, kneeling down beside him.

"Well, I can't say that our cult ever taught me how to torture. Though, perhaps I just didn't stick around long enough to learn." Forovos grabbed the man's bound hand, with his opposite hand he slowly inserted the rusted blade between the flesh and finger nail of the man's finger. *Now he screamed.*

The agonizing yelps echoed in the dark room, the flames in the lanterns dancing to the noise. Forovos smiled with satisfaction, slowly ripping the nail from the man's bloody mess of a finger. The screams became a melodic tune, yet Forovos found little enjoyment from it. He freed the nail from the man's flesh.

“Are you ready to speak now?” Forovos asked impatiently, boredom in his tone. The assassin gritted his teeth, pain in his eyes.

“Fuck you!” He groaned, holding back the pain he was enduring. Forovos smiled, gently applying pressure on the scalpel against his raw flesh. His body squirmed desperately, trying to free himself from the pain, his screams becoming near deafening. “YIELD!” He finally yelled, and Forovos released the pressure for a moment.

“What was that?” Forovos asked, taunting the assassin. The man’s voice shuddered, tears building up in his eyes.

“Mercy, please!” He pleaded desperately, still shaking. Forovos sighed and shook his head. “Not until I get what I want from you.” Forovos reapplied the pressure, and the screams continued.

“PLEASE!” He yelped, tears streaming down his face. “I’LL TELL YOU ANYTHING, JUST MAKE IT STOP!” Forovos pulled the blade away, nodding in agreement.

“Why were you following me?” Forovos repeated his earlier question, and this time the man was more cooperative. His eyes teary, his voice shaking, his body shuddering. “You were my contract.” He finally revealed, letting out a moan of agony. Forovos nodded, frowning.

“Why?” He asked. “I was banished for my treachery.” The man smirked, despite being in horrible pain. He shook his head. “No one gets away that easily.” He muttered, and Forovos smiled. “So they sent an acolyte to kill me, after I left willingly.” The man scowled in reply, spitting out more blood from his mouth.

“You broke your contract, killing that keyholder out of your own petty vengeance.” Forovos grinned to this, the memory still fresh in his mind.

“Stellios Favaal. Do you want to know why I did it?” Forovos asked, and the man groaned. “Do I have a choice?” He asked, and Forovos’ grin died down to a smile. “No.” He admitted, thinking back to the keyholder.

“My father was a merchant from Lys, though he was not your usual merchant you see. He sold poisons, like the Strangler and Tears of Lys. I’d often help him deliver his merchandise to his clients, though I never knew how big a business this was for him.” Forovos sighed, the recollection of his father was something he seldom thought on, and it bothered him somewhat.

“He was in debt with the Iron Bank, with the corrupted bastard Stellios Favaal. One day I was delivering his merchandise, and when I returned I found him dead on the floor of our home, a letter signed from that bastard keyholder. He claimed our debt was paid, yet he wanted interest. Greedy fucker.” Anger flashed through Forovos as he remembered that day. “So I left home, with nowhere to go. Once I reached the House of Black and White, I trained. I wanted vengeance, and I got it. No, he was not my contract, though I was in the Iron Bank and I seized the opportunity. Now I’m filthy rich as a consequence.” Forovos said with a smirk, but the assassin chuckled dryly, shaking his head.

“It won’t last. They’ll send more of us after you, we won’t stop until a debt is repaid.” Forovos smiled, standing himself up. “Good luck finding me.” Forovos turned his gaze to the lantern on the table, the oil canister next to it.

He walked to the desk and grabbed them both, removing the lid on the canister. Returning to the assassin, he drizzled the oil onto his chest and face until the can was empty. He hovered the burning flame of the lantern over the man, peering down at him.

“Any last words?” Forovos asked, genuinely curious. The man smirked at him and sighed, shaking his head.

“Only that I hope you enjoy your life while it lasts. Money can buy you many things, though it will soon run out, as will your luck.” Forovos smiled, releasing the lantern. “I buy my own luck.”

Flames engulfed the man, screams filled the room, until there was only silence and a charred stench. Forovos wiped the blood from his hands on his coat, frowning at the sight. *Valar Morghulis.*

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Isabella Fowler – Tourney of Starfall

Princess Isabella Fowler stood on the shore, admiring the beauty of Starfall one more time before she would go back home to Skyreach. Starfall was a place that Isabella had visited quite often growing up but its beauty never faded to her. The Torrentine’s never ending waters flowing along with the Summer Sea that it merged with, and the beautiful white

castle, the home of the royal family of Dayne, which had towers that stood so tall it looked as if the castle were among the clouds during the day and the stars at night.

It was all so breathtaking to Isabella, and even though she had many unforgettable memories of Starfall from her visits as a child, she could easily say that this week topped them all.

Not only had she got to witness the great tourney of Starfall firsthand, where she witnessed many great knights in their shining armors competing for gold, glory, and maybe even love along with many wonderful feasts, plays and performances that were nothing short of mesmerizing.

She had even witnessed the surprise return of King Vorian Dayne to tourney participation when he had outlasted fifty other knights to win the melee, wielding of course House Dayne's legendary greatsword Dawn. This had brought everyone in attendance to their feet especially King Vorian's wife Queen Arenna, who had admired her victorious husband with loving eyes, and Vorian had gazed upon her in the same manner.

Isabella thought about how that moment was just like in the stories she had read where the valiant knight would celebrate with their true love after a great victory, and ride off into the sunset. Isabella wondered if she would ever feel the same kind of love and admiration from someone she cared about and truthfully she wondered if all of those stories with happy endings she had dreamed about time and time again were nothing more than lies.

However even King Vorian's great triumph would be overshadowed by what was to come when Isabella witnessed her longtime friend Prince Jamison Dayne unhorse Prince Naemon Blackmont to win the joust of the Tourney of Starfall, and along with that the respect and admiration of almost everyone in attendance. Isabella had known Jamison for nearly both of their entire lives and had admired him quietly for years, but figured that Jamison did not feel the same about her.

Sure, Jamison had always been kind to Isabella but she couldn't help but wonder if Jamison only treated her as he did because she was a daughter of a king herself and Isabella had worried that Jamison just considered her a friend at best. She figured that Jamison would prefer a more outgoing girl like Ashara Nightfall or Madison Tarly with both of them claiming that Jamison only had eyes for them. So the moment when Jamison rode past both of those girls, along with countless others, on his all black destrier to crown Isabella the Queen of Love and Beauty, she was awestruck and could not believe that her dream just may come

true. However, now she was heading home and she wondered what Jamison crowning her had truly meant. She hoped it would mean a betrothal and eventual marriage would follow, but she was trying not to get herself too excited, as she feared that it wouldn't happen and she would only end up disappointed.

All at once however, Isabella was snapped out of her thoughts by two familiar voices – it sounded like they were arguing. Isabella's older brother Prince Desmor and Prince Jamison were barking something at each other. Isabella wanted to have a conversation with Jamison before leaving, so she hurried towards the voices, also hoping she could stop the argument before it would turn violent. As she got closer she noticed most of the anger was coming from her older brother.

"You got lucky this time, Jamison." Prince Desmor barked to Prince Jamison with anger in his words. "You won now, I admit that, but don't stand here and talk down to me, acting as if I wasn't even a competition for you." Jamison rolled his eyes and smirked at him, only making Desmor angrier, and quickly retorted back. "To be honest you really weren't much of a competition, Fowler." He said coldly. "I almost feel sorry for you embarrassing yourself in front of everyone. Yet if I remember correctly I told you that you should drop out of the tournament and save yourself from the inevitable, but your foolish pride got in the way." Jamison placed great emphasis on the last phrase. Jamison was about to continue insulting Desmor, but he had clearly had enough.

"Enough! I have had it with you, I am not going to stand here and take any more of this!" Isabella's older brother bellowed, but Jamison just laughed, completely ignoring Desmor's words and the anger behind them. "Fine, I am finished with you, Desmor. I have listened to your complaining long enough, so just get out of my face before I decide to put in your place yet again." Jamison spoke with an arrogant smirk on his face, and with threatening words. "It's not like I came here to listen to you cry about your defeats. I am here to see your sister or should I say my Queen." Jamison said this with a calm tone and genuine smile, but Desmor now tensed up even more. "We are not finished here, Jamison. Oh, and you will not see my sister and she is certainly not your queen." He said strictly, and Jamison took a step toward him and with a cold look in his eyes he said: "We're not finished here you say? We'll see about that."

Right then, Isabella had enough of their non-sense. "Stop it now!" She shouted for them both, with strength that surprised even herself. "You are both acting like children." With those words, Desmor and Jamison stopped and turned to look at her. Jamison looked slightly

embarrassed about what had happened, and after briefly glancing away, he turned to look Isabella straight in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Isabella." He said, embarrassment in his words. "It seems Desmor and I both got a bit worked up, we shouldn't have acted this way." Desmor still stared daggers at Jamison, but was also starting to calm down. "Yeah, Jamison is right." He muttered. "We are both competitive, but we should leave it on the tourney field. I apologize as well, Bella."

Isabella now calmed down herself and most of her previous courage gone, she shyly asked her brother: "Desmor, can I please have a moment with Jamison?" The look that Desmor gave her was clearly disapproving, but finally he let out a sigh and nodded. "Of course Bella, take all of the time that you need, father will certainly not leave without you." He spoke with calm tone. "I'll go talk to him and let him know that you will come in a moment." With that Prince Desmor walked away to meet with their father King Garrison, older brother Prince Ferris, and their Aunt Obara along with the rest of the Fowler convoy. And so, Jamison and Isabella were left alone.

After a brief awkward silence Isabella was the first to speak up. "Why do you have to be so hard on my brother?" Isabella asked meekly, immediately regretting it. She had never said anything negative towards Jamison before. She was worried about how he would react, but Jamison looked at her with genuine regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I can be a bit harsh on people, but if you ask me to, I'll never say a bad word about your brother again." He said, and then a smirk appeared on his face. "Though Desmor has never really seemed to like me." He remarked. "And I can admit that I kind of enjoy making him angry." At this point, Isabella was quite disappointed in Jamison, but at the same time amused.

"Yes, you and Desmor have never gotten along very well." She said with a little chuckle. "But could you please try to be nicer to him?" Isabella asked with a kind tone. "Desmor was so excited for this tourney, and he thought that he would have a chance to do well, not to get defeated by you in the first round." Jamison sighed, but gave her an agreeing nod. "I suppose you've got a point." He said smoothly. "It's probably for the best that I get along with your brother, or better yet get along with all of your family." Jamison said this with an amused smirk, and Isabella replicated it. For a moment they just looked at each other, with happiness and love in their eyes.

"So what did you think of the tournament?" Jamison finally asked. "It was amazing." Isabella answered truthfully. "Pretty much all I could ask for, really. It was just like in the songs." Isabella spoke with a dreamy look in her eyes. "Not only did I get to see your father win the

melee, I also saw you win the joust at your own nameday tourney. I would imagine that this tourney will be remembered in history.”

“As it should be.” Jamison replied with a cocky grin. “This was my tourney to win, and there was no way I was going to let anyone stop me.” He spoke with a proud and confident tone.

“I’m sure your father was very proud of you after your great victory.” Isabella said shyly, worrying that she may be prodding her, Jamison however just chuckled and smiled at her.

“I suppose father may be proud of me, but he has a very funny way of showing it. After I won the tourney, Vorian gave me a lecture about how even though I won, he saw cousin Naemon as the true winner.” Jamison’s tone was slightly bitter, and he rolled his eyes at the thought.

“Father said that Naemon fought with honor and handled his defeat with grace, while I was a sore winner. He said that I could learn something from Naemon especially how he lives up to how a knight should act in victory and defeat. That Naemon always carries himself with honor and dignity and that with my behavior that at times I should not even call myself a knight.” Jamison now had an outright upset look on his face. “I don’t know what it will take to impress that man. I don’t understand it, father expects me to live up to these absurd standards he has, but that simply isn’t who I am.” Jamison said, sounding almost defeated. “I don’t care what father says, I would rather be hated for who I am than loved for something I’m not.” He spoke with underlying anger in his words. Isabella now felt awful for bringing up this topic, and did not know what to say.

“I’m sorry, I should not be acting this way.” Jamison said as he noticed her sad expression. “I have put a lot of pressure on myself to win and be the best. I am sure father will recognize the hard work that I have put in.” He said with slightly more positive tone, trying to hold his composure and hold back the disappointment he had shown earlier.

Isabella was starting to wonder if Jamison would mention him crowning her, but as soon as the thought crossed her mind, a charming smile appeared on Jamison’s face. “And at least I know that one thing couldn’t have gone better this week.” He said with a warm tone, though Isabella could also spot a touch of nervousness in it. “I have finally crowned my queen.”

Jamison stated with a smile on his face, and immediately Isabella felt overwhelmed – and she was sure it showed. “I have waited a long time to do this and I hope you feel the same.” The Sword of the Night whispered, and Isabella immediately pulled him in with a hug, and Jamison pulled her in even closer, and kissed her. Isabella felt the Prince’s soft lips against hers, and it felt as if time stood still.

When they finally let go of one another, Isabella still could not believe what was happening. She looked up to Jamison's dark purple eyes. "Ashara Nightfall told that you were going to crown her the Queen of Love & Beauty once you'd win the tourney." She said quietly. Now Jamison just smirked and let out a hearty little laugh. "Oh Bella, Ashara surely wishes that would happen, but there was never a chance for it- she is not you." Prince Jamison said with confident and adoring words.

As soon as Isabella was going to respond, she heard her brother Desmor's voice calling for her. "It is time to go Bella, our ship is getting ready to set sail – time to go home!" He yelled, Prince Ferris standing next to him, and Isabella called back to her brothers with pleading words: "Please, can't they wait?" She looked back at Jamison, and the Sword of the Night just laughed. "It's okay Isabella, I have crowned you my Queen of Love and Beauty. No one would get in the way of that. I will talk to my father, and soon enough, we will be betrothed. There is no way father will turn me down after this week." Jamison spoke with determined words.

Isabella looked up at Jamison and let out a sigh. "I suppose I must go." She said with a sad tone. "It seems that you must." Jamison replied with a smile. "But you'll be back, I will make sure of it". And so Isabella turned toward the ship with all of House Fowler waiting on her, but all at once Jamison pulled her around and passionately kissed her again, in front of everyone, and Isabella just wanted that moment to last forever. "Of course I could not forget that." Jamison said with great satisfaction, and Isabella blushed. "Jamison! You can't do that in front of my brothers." She said, but Jamison just looked at her with his passionate purple eyes and said. "Why not, you are my queen." He said with a smirk and with passionate words Jamison proudly proclaimed to her. "Soon enough Starfall will be your home and no one not my family, not your family no one will be able to tell us what to do or keep us apart. I will see you soon."

And with that Isabella got on the ship to take her back to the Dornish mainland, and away from Starfall. She went back to thinking about her week. Before what just happened she had believed that it may have been the perfect week, but now she knew without a doubt that it had been. She would remember this forever.

Jamison Dayne - Knightly Vows

Without honor, knights can't be called knights. The vows we speak are to be held and never forsaken, for without our vows, we are no different than any back alley thug who live and die by their blades every single day. Jamison had been told this in some shape or form countless times throughout his life by his own father, as well as by the knight he squired for, Ser Laroy Ladybright. They both held knighthood to a high standard, from which they believed no one was worthy of it until they earned it. However, from all the tourneys, duels and various fights Jamison had been involved in, he believed what they said was far from the truth. Jamison had seen the true colors of many a knights and he knew most of them certainly would not live up to his father's expectations. Most knights were knights for the prestige it brought, the gold and lands it earned them, or simply they just liked killing and with a Ser in front of your name, killing is far easier to get away with. That is not to say that there aren't knights who try to live up to the code of knighthood, but those men are few and far between.

On this day the knights of honor and knights without honor were all in the same place. The tourney of Griffin's Roost was truly quite the sight to behold. It was held in the countryside surrounding the griffin's castle and on this day the stormy waters of Shipbreaker Bay were unusually calm with the tides offering more of a soothing whisper rather than the very loud whipping roar that was oh so prevalent. The sky had been clear, sun shining through the trees with great intensity, and there were no dark clouds in sight. It was almost the perfect day to end a tourney, and if there was any tourney similar to the ones in the songs, this one could be it. However, there was one fatal flaw – Jamison Dayne was about to ruin the plans of Lord Davith Connington. It was said that this tourney was specifically set up for his son and heir Ser Robert Connington to win. The lists were filled with mediocrity and conveniently enough, Ser Robert was lucky enough to face the worst knights in the whole tourney on his way to the finals, with the hope that all of the talented knights would knock each other out and the one that would make it to the finals would be too tired to compete with Ser Robert, who was quite the jousting knight in his own right. Ser Robert would win, and then officially declare his betrothed Princess Marleina Durrandon the Queen of Love and Beauty. And everything went as planned, until Ser Robert faced Prince Jamison in the finals. When Jamison decisively unhorsed the young griffin and won the tourney however, nothing truly changed, and it certainly showed at the feast held directly after the joust was finished.

Leaning back in his chair with an annoyed look on his face, Jamison watched disappointedly as Ser Robert danced with Princess Marleina as the music played softly in the background of the great hall of Griffin's Roost. Ser Robert had a smug and satisfied look on his face as if he were on top of the world, but Jamison did notice that the Storm Princess looked a bit less enamored with Ser Robert. In truth, Marleina looked almost annoyed in having to be dancing with the red haired knight. After the dance finished Ser Robert's eyes briefly met with Jamison's, which led to the young Connington giving Jamison an arrogant smirk, as if to say that he had truly won in the end. Meanwhile Princess Marleina quickly walked out of the great hall, but not before giving a quick glance toward Jamison, as he had noticed her doing several times throughout the tourney. This amused Jamison for a moment, but quickly he went back to being annoyed. Rolling his eyes, he turned to look at Ser Alester Upton, who sat right next to him. "Only in this world of ours can losers actually win. I embarrassed him... defeated him right at his family's ancestral home and yet here he is looking so proud as if he actually accomplished something," the Prince spoke with bitter tone. Alester who was devouring his plate of food looked up at Jamison and shrugged his shoulders lazily. "It seems he is doing better than either of us, Jamison. He has the best looking girl in here on his arm, and soon she will be in his bed every night. Ah, how I wish I could get a piece of her" said Alester with an arrogant smirk on his face.

Jamison, even though still aggravated, could not help but laugh at Alester's bluntness. "You do have a point Alester, she is certainly not hard on the eyes. But she is no Isabella" He said with genuine tone. Hearing that, Alester's smirk got even wider "Oh gods, not her again. Here you are, Prince Jamison Dayne, the Sword of the Night and the best knight in Dorne. Your foes fear and respect you, and you can get nearly any woman you want, but yet all I have heard you do since we have left Starfall is sit around and complain because King Vorian would not let you marry some girl who I have never heard speak more than five words. Do you honestly believe you would be happy with her?" Right when Jamison was about to answer Alester continued "She is far too boring for you Jamison, you can do far better than Isabella Fowler. Ashara Nightfall on the other hand? Now that is a lady. She has thrown herself at you for years, and you can tell by looking at her that she knows her way around the bedroom, unlike your Princess who probably doesn't even know that men have cocks." With that Alester busted out laughing, but Jamison had heard enough and quickly silenced Alester. "You are one of my closest friends Alester, and for that I will forgive you, but if you say another cruel thing of Isabella I'll have no problem knocking some sense into you." He spoke with cold tone. Alester's eyes widened in surprise and he immediately apologized.

"Calm down, there's no need to be like that. You know it is just a jest. All I am saying is, you can't just wait around on your father to change his mind about it. For all we know, King Garrison could've set up a betrothal for her already. I want to see my friend back, not this brooding man that has replaced him. Something did not go your way for once, so what? Just get back up on the horse and find someone else. Gods know it won't be hard for you" said Alester with a slight chuckle.

Clearly surprised by the motivational speech that Alester had just given, Jamison somewhat agreed with him. "I suppose you are right, Alester," He said with a small smirk. "I won't forget Isabella, and I won't stop trying to make it happen, but I can't just wait around for something that might never happen. It has been a little while since I've been with a girl, I believe it is time to change that and I know just who to start with." Said Jamison with an arrogant smirk, and Alester replicated it. "Now that is the Jamison I know, but please don't let it be the girl I think you are speaking of." Jamison chuckled arrogantly, and ignoring Alester's words, he left the great hall.

Jamison briefly walked through the castle of Griffin's Roost, and soon he saw Princess Marleina Durrandon standing on a balcony, watching the sunset overlooking the unusually calm waters of Shipbreaker Bay. The Storm Princess was even more enchanting up close with her long black hair elegantly curled and blue eyes so blue it was as if you were looking into the Sapphire waters surrounding the Island of Tarth. She wore a strikingly beautiful red and white gown in the colors of her betrothed's house, and had a slightly sad look on her face. While the Storm Princess was very attractive, she was no Princess of Stone and Sky, but for this evening she would have to do.

Princess Marleina turned around to see Jamison walking up to her and with a slight smile, she was the first to speak. "Good evening, Ser Jamison, and congratulations on winning the tournament. You fought valiantly and defeated my betrothed, it was quite the performance." The princess spoke with a kind and almost seductive tone. Jamison gave the Princess a charming smile and proceeded to correct her. "Actually it is Prince Jamison, my Princess, but yes I am a knight, as I am sure that you know."

"Indeed I do, and you seem to be quite the talented knight as well." said the Princess with a blush, but now with curiosity clearly showing in her tone, she continued, "I have heard a great many things about you Prince Jamison. I have heard many say you are the best knight

down in Dorne. Obviously I can't say whether that is true or not, but I have heard Robert complain for weeks once he heard you were entering this tournament. I actually saw what looked to almost be fear in his eyes when you were first mentioned, and I have to wonder why that is? I mean you are just a knight like any other, what makes you so different?" She asked inquisitively, biting her lip. Jamison could sense already that she was attracted to him, and it seemed she was intrigued by his reputation, so he decided to pour it on. With confidence brimming from his words Jamison smoothly told her "I have to disagree with you on one thing, I am far from just being any other knight. There isn't anyone like me, most knights are content wearing their shiny armor and taking part in tourney after tourney where they are unhorsed in the joust and defeated in the melee by better men. Most knights are weak, they want the title but not the burden that comes with it. They speak the vows about how knights are protectors, brave and just, but they don't truly mean them and they deny what is right in front of them. Knights are meant to battle and defeat their foes, by any means necessary."

Jamison could sense how excited Marleina was, and the look in her eyes just exuded that excitement. The Storm Princess now softly grazed Jamison's arm, looking him in his eyes. "So you have been in battle and you have... killed a man before?" Her voice was seductive as she asked this. Jamison, now with his face within inches of hers, answered. "I have. I am not saying that I am proud of it, but fighting another man for real is unlike any experience that can possibly be imagined. It is a test as much mental as it is physical. Most knights and men in general fear battle and pray to whichever gods they pray to avoid it. They may hide on the edge of the battlefield, or hide in their liege's castle saying that they are protecting it. This is where I am different. When in battle with swords, axes, warhammers, lances and armor clashing all around me... with death surrounding me, I can't say that there is another time that I feel more alive." The Sword of the Night said this with a charming smile on his face. At this point, Jamison could clearly see that his words had worked with Marleina, who was now inching even closer to him. Softly the Storm Princess purred, "Oh you are so brave, all knights wish they were like you."

"You are right, they do wish they could be like me, but I'm the only one like me." Jamison spoke with arrogant passion, and picked the Storm Princess up. With her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, Jamison pushed her against the wall. He kissed her passionately, and Princess Marleina did not resist. Then he kissed her neck and started to pull up her gown but the Storm Princess nervously stopped him. "Wait!" She hissed, "We can't do this

here, not out in the open... if Robert or worse my father finds out... they would kill the both of us."

"I am not Ser Bryen the one eyed hedge knight and as for the Storm King, I am not scared of him either, I would like to see them try." Jamison replied with a smirk, but as Marleina still looked unconvinced, he continued. "My Princess, the Maid charges me to protect all women, and to me it seems you need protected. However, if you wish, we don't have to do this here." With those words, the Storm Princess' eyes lit up and she took Jamison by the hand.

Sneakily she lead him to her chambers, and on the way up, a plethora of thoughts entered Jamison's mind. Jamison thought of his father's lectures about not dishonoring himself, he thought of Nealia and mother always telling him to stay out of trouble, and he also regretted listening to Alester's "motivational" words, and most importantly, he thought of Princess Isabella, and how much he missed her. He wished Vorian would have accepted the betrothal proposal, so he would not even be in this situation right now, and he and Isabella could be traveling north to visit the Wall together, just like they had planned. He wondered if Isabella still thought of him, and of how she would undoubtedly not be proud of his behavior tonight. He wondered if they would get to see each other again, let alone get married. Jamison knew he only wanted her, and the thought of Isabella not being with him and her being disappointed in him was enough to nearly turn around and go back to the great hall.

However, they had already reached Princess Marleina's room. Elegantly the Storm Princess undressed her gown, and stood naked before him. Brief passion took over Jamison's feelings, and as he watched the Storm Princess walk toward him, his knightly vows entered his mind, and how absurd they truly were. Specifically he thought about the swearing to the Maid again. He realized that in a way he was fulfilling his vows by protecting Princess Marleina from a life of boredom, well, for one night anyway. With these thoughts in mind, Jamison pulled the Storm Princess into him and smirked, thinking, *Who says I am not a true knight?*

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Valor Veltaris - A New Beginning

Ships lined the Orange Shore nearly as far as the eye could see, the sails of them displaying a dragon flying downward, toward the unknown. Maybe the dragon was flying down to

vanquish his foes, or maybe this dragon was falling into the abyss. The many sellswords among the Fallen Dragons saw this dragon as a sign of their strength rather than their weakness. However, ask anyone of the Freehold however, and they would tell the latter, they would speak harshly of “The Fallen Dragon” Valor Veltaris who tucked his tail and ran away from triumph, a victory which will never be erased. And what is the truth about what this dragon really means? Well, Valor Veltaris had heard many viewpoints on the subject, and only he could deem which one was true.

Just a few short years ago, Prince Garin and the Rhoynar were crushed by the Valyrian Freehold who sent three hundred dragons to rain fire and blood down upon them. They were punished for not knowing their place the dragonlords said. And what did they say when Prince Garin united the Rhoynar under one cause, to fight back against them, and then defeated them in Selhorys, Valysar, and finally at the great battle of Volon Therys? The dragonlords said that just like unruly dogs, it is time that they are put down. And no matter how true or untrue their statement about the Rhoynar people was, they were indeed put down just like dogs. The Rhoynar people, lands, and their culture was utterly destroyed root and stem and banished from Essos forever. So, when Valor had been approached by some keyholder from the Iron Bank of Braavos, who promised his company a great reward for helping the last remnants of the Rhoynar people conquer the foreign land of Dorne and unite it under their rule, Valor had plenty of reason to be suspicious. At one time, Valor had played a great role for the Valyrian side in the war and most notably led the Valyrian Vanguard to their defeat in the battle of Volon Therys. Valor had killed many Rhoynar and wanted to see them destroyed. However, somewhere along the way a small shred of the humanity and compassion for others that Valor thought he had lost long ago had came back, as he had witnessed young children and their mothers, who played no part in the war, being burned alive just the same as the Rhoynar rebels that Valor had encountered on the battlefield. *“What the rebels faced was a result of war, what their wives and children faced was unnecessary slaughter”* The thought ate at Valor, and haunted him just enough to leave it all behind.

However, Valor had a feeling that this Princess Nymeria of Ny Sar and now Sandship would not see him in that light, regardless of Forovos Norvoshi telling him otherwise. She would see a monster who was one of many who led to her people’s dynasty falling. She would see a man who slaughtered her people and she would see him as a firsthand reminder of all that she and the other Rhoynar had lost and why they had lost it. Valor also knew that Princess

Nymeria could be not be so pure of heart herself. *"She wants to do to the Dornish what the Valyrians did to her, what makes her so different from them?"* Princess Nymeria's hypocrisy was apparent to Valor, but in a sense, he could say the same about most of the Valyrians as well. He owed the Rhoynar for the tragedy that they had suffered, and this was the time and opportunity for a Valyrian to set things right with them. He had also heard of the Rhoynar among his ranks that Nymeria was a just ruler, so maybe her war could turn out to bring peace to this foreign land. Valor also knew that blood and steel would line the road to peace regardless of how just or unjust she would turn out to be. In reality, Valor Veltaris knew that this mission would firmly establish his legacy. After this he and his men would be set for life, but the work to get to that point was only just beginning.

Valor Veltaris sat alone at the head of the table of the Fallen Dragon's war council room on Valor's main ship. The Fallen Dragon's war council meeting had just finished and much had been discussed. Primarily Valor had heard complaining from his most trusted generals and commanders, about how conquering six Dornish kingdoms would be next to impossible. They did not know the land and they simply did not have the numbers, even with the Rhoynar and Martell armies backing them. Valor had heard that most of Nymeria's army were women, who simply couldn't handle the rigors of war. He was also told that the deserts of the Kingdom of Brimstone carried such immense heat that it would kill every man that they had. Even if they were fortunate enough to conquer the Kingdom of Brimstone, they would still have the Dornish Kingdoms of the North and West to deal with, which most would agree is where the true powers of Dorne were. The Bloodroyal, King Yorick Yronwood, reigned over most of the north and central parts of Dorne with an iron fist, while the legendary Daynes of Starfall led by the Sword of the Evening, King Vorian Dayne, ruled the west with a keep that was literally impossible to breach. All Valor had heard was why they couldn't complete this mission, and no reasons why they could. Valor could see their arguments, and maybe this mission was just asking for death, but Valor and the Fallen Dragons had faced horrible odds before and succeeded. So, Valor would make sure that they would succeed once more.

Valor leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for the first time in what felt to be an eternity, but as soon as he closed them, he quickly opened them again hearing a familiar voice. It was Maran of Ny Sar, a young Rhoynar boy around the age of 13, who squired for one of his commanders. "Uh.... Commander Valor", the young boy nervously began scratching his head, "Ser Rickard and his soldiers have gathered all of the men, and the

ships are ready to set sail. However, he has heard of rumblings around the camp, with most of the men seeming to be unsure about our mission. Ser Rickard figures it is for the best if you talk to them and try to motivate them, if you can." After his words, the squire looked at Valor, clearly nervous about having just interrupted his leader's private time. Valor could sense the boy's anxiety, so he figured he should calm him down. "It is alright Maran", Valor began calmly, "I figured the time for this would come. It is best that the men hear exactly what this mission is going to entail, and every person out there should know exactly who they are fighting and what we are up against." After hearing these words, Maran breathed a sigh of relief as if he had just come back from a battle himself. "Yes ser, of course", the young Rhoyнар said in complete agreement. At this point, Valor stood up from his chair and walked out. Maran followed, seemingly have to take five strides for every couple that Valor took.

Climbing up the ladder and now on the deck of the ship, Valor and Maran could see the sellswords standing on the shore as far as the eye could see, and as soon as Valor came into their sight, they roared in applause and appreciation. "Dragonheart! Dragonheart!" The Fallen Dragons chanted in what was near perfect unison. With a confident stride Valor walked forward, now standing beside his top commanders, including Olyvar Forrester who had just returned. "Welcome back Forrester, I was worried you would miss out on the fun", said Valor with a joking tone, and the Northman just smirked. "Glad to be back, Veltaris. Now, you should probably go and try to convince these poor souls that this fight is for a good cause." Valor gave him a nod and stepped to the front of his main commanders.

Seeing the sheer amount of men who have joined this company in such a short time, and how much respect they all have for him, was still an overwhelming feeling to Valor. He knew that most of these men probably would not make it out of this mission alive, just like countless men who had served under Valor before, but for now he tried to put those thoughts out of his mind. Looking at the Fallen Dragons who were still continuing the Dragonheart chants, Valor decided to start.

"Fallen Dragons!" Valor started with a loud and confident tone. "I know there has been some confusion about what our next mission pertains to. I have heard all of the talk around our camp, and I will confirm the truth to you all now. No, we are not marching to the capital of Valyria to confront the might of the Freehold, and we are finished with our business in the Dothraki Sea, but I am not going to lie to you, this mission could potentially be more

dangerous than any mission that we have encountered yet." Valor said this last phrase with great seriousness and now walked over to the top of the ship's ladder, so his soldiers from a further distance could hopefully hear what he was saying.

Again he began, "Yes, some of the talk is true, we will be taking a job from a Rhoynar, and not just any Rhoynar, but the Princess Nymeria - formerly of Ny Sar and now of Sandship." With this phrase, Valor paused and listened to the reactions of his men, which ranged from cheers to boos, and to others complete silence but not out of indifference, but rather of the shock of what they were hearing. After a moment Valor continued, "Now I know that for many of you the Rhoynar are a topic which is not preferred to be spoken of, and from both sides I understand your point of view. For the Valyrians among us, the Rhoynar remind of death and destruction, since many of you lost friends and family because of the Second Spice War. I myself am no different." Said Commander Valor with a clearly grim and disappointed tone. "Not a moment goes by, that I don't think about the countless brothers in arms that I lost in my many battles against them. Particularly I think about my defeat at the battle of Volon Therys to Prince Garin's mighty army. I remember the dragons falling from the sky to their deaths, the sounds of the Valyrian soldiers screaming, crying out for help from their mothers, the gods and anyone who would listen, as they were drowned alive and brought face to face with their death. The sight of my own soldiers being drowned alive is something that I will never forget, and the fact that I could do nothing to save them makes it even worse."

At this point, Valor's emotions were starting to get the better of him, but he did not let it show on his face and continued on. "For the Rhoynar among us, as few of you as there are, I know of the pain my people have brought down upon you as well. Fire and blood was brought down upon your homelands, with many people who did not deserve it facing the wrath of the dragonlords and their dragons. I witnessed many of these atrocities firsthand myself, and the sight of Rhoynar burning, innocent children and women burning is a sight that is something I wish I had never seen." Clearly saddened with what he was saying himself, he decided to change the subject. "But with every struggle in life, with every horrible ending, there is a new beginning worth finding and in the face of tragedy, my life was forever changed when not far from here, is where I finally realized that the Freehold was not worthy of fighting for anymore. I left that life behind me, and the Fallen Dragons were formed."

Mentioning the Fallen Dragons brought a cheer from his men, and Valor figured now was the

time to completely change the tone of what had thus far been a grim speech. "The Fallen Dragons gave me a new purpose, and I hope it has for all of you as well. From day one, I established this company as a place where all men are equal. Valyrian, Rhoynar, Westerosi, or Dothraki – it does not matter who you are or where you come from. Now we are brothers in arms together, we shed the blood of our foes together. Our strength comes from our unity, our determination and our skill, and we have no equal." Valor said this with confidence brimming in his words, and the Fallen Dragons roared in cheers with Valor taking a pause and letting the cheers run their course before he continued again.

"Now brothers, again I won't lie to you, this mission is dangerous. We set sail to what is to most of us a foreign land, to take part in unseating of six long established dynasties, to make room for a new one. Dayne, Yronwood, Fowler, Dryland, Blackmont and Manwoody. Those names mean nothing to most of us, but to the people of Dorne those names mean everything. We are fighting to take their past, present, and future from them, and they certainly won't go down without a fight. Quite frankly, we may be sailing to our deaths, since they do have the numbers, the power, and the knowledge of the terrain at their disposal. I understand completely if any of you decide not to partake in this mission, and if you decide not to join me on this voyage, I understand completely." Valor spoke with an honest and genuine tone.

At this point, Valor paused, and to his surprise, at least from what he could tell, none of his men moved. "While the odds are surely against us, that has never stopped us before." These words brought the men closest to Valor to laughter. Now feeling it was time to wrap it up, Valor began closing his speech. "Brothers! You know as well as I do that the history won't remember our names, and many of us will surely face our deaths on this mission. But as we always have, we will fight for a better future, for a new beginning. And with this new beginning, we either set sail to victory, or we set sail to defeat, but the only way now, gentlemen, is forward!" With those words, Valor unsheathed his sword pointing it toward the southwest toward Dorne and with arrogance in his words, Valor boastfully reminded his men: "The future is ours for the taking, and it begins NOW!" The Fallen Dragons roared in applause for their leader, and went back to chanting "Dragonheart!" in unison. Valor stood there for a moment taking in his surroundings, before turning around toward the front of his ship with his ship now setting sail and the other Fallen Dragons began lining up toward their respective ships. With a sigh, Valor thought of the battles that lied ahead and wondered if what he was doing was truly right. This was indeed a new beginning for him and the Fallen

Dragons, but he could only wonder if this new beginning would be for the better. But as he already knew, only time would tell.

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Eraehra Galnaris - The Broken Promise

That day in Valyria began like any other for Eraehra Galnaris, calm and peaceful. However, little did she know that this would be the day that would change not only her life, but the entire Galnaris family forever. On the morning Eraehra was being tutored by her mentor Maemar. It was not too long ago that her father did not approve of her being so inquisitive about wanting to learn and understand the histories and cultures of other people, but he had eventually relented. Unbeknownst to him though, Maemar had been secretly fueling Eraehra's curiosity and tutoring her for years.

Eraehra listened to the teachings of Maemar, her older brother Raevon was feeding the family dragon and checking on her eggs, and her younger sister, Vaela, was waking up late and getting ready for the day. It seemed like just another day for this Dragonlord family. This time Eraehra was learning about the people, land, and culture of Naath. The bodyguard Jaelor was standing in guard nearby as the lesson was ending. "So Eraehra, tell me, what do you find most interesting about the people of Naath?" Maemar inquired. Eraehra pondered on the question for a moment, and then answered, "I am impressed by their peacefulness and aversion to war. I wish all people could share their view of the world." Maemar looked at her with sincerity in his wrinkled eyes. "Yes, that would be nice", he said with a small sigh, "However, it is highly unrealistic. You should also remember that it is their own passivity that allows the people of Naath to be so easily captured and enslaved. Even their Butterfly fever can't always protect them." Just as Eraehra was about to answer, Grezhan burst through the door. The Ghiscari bodyguard had to catch his breath for a moment, and Jaelor who stood next to him looked at him with mild confusion. "Lady Eraehra, your father requests the presence of you and your siblings immediately", Grezhan said with a serious tone on his voice.

Grezhan and Jaelor escorted Eraehra through the palace, and as they arrived to the Great Hall she noticed that her father, Lord Daehron, and her siblings Raevon and Vaela were already there. She did not see her mother, Lady Vysaela, but she could hear her faint crying

from the corridor. Lord Daehron looked a little disheveled, with glazed and weak look on his eyes. Never before had Eraehra seen her father in such a state.

Raevon was the first to speak up. "What is this about father?" He asked carefully. "Why did you call us here?" Their father looked at them intently and said, "As you know your brother Jaevon has been serving as my brother's...", he paused for a moment, let out a sigh, and continued, "Jaevon has been your Uncle Jaegaron's squire. As you also know, they were supposed to return here in a couple of years. However, that is no longer going to happen." "What do you mean?" Vaela interjected, though it was clear from her shaky voice that she had the same bad feeling that Eraehra had. And so, Daehron continued, "Your Uncle was leading a small retinue of soldiers down a path between two cliffs. Your brother was with him, and..." Daehron stopped, closing his eyes and clenching his teeth to keep his composure. "Apparently, the cowardly Rhoynar ambushed the retinue and blocked their escapes. Their blasted water witches used their magic to trap and drown many, and the rest... the rest were slain. Your uncle and brother did not make it." For a moment silence lingered in the hall, and Eraehra could see the shock and grief taking over her sibling's expressions. "No... It can't be", Raevon muttered, tears coming to his eyes. NOO!, he wailed as he buried his face in his hands, his silver hair falling over them. Vaela fainted after hearing the news, but the guards and servants quickly attended to her. Eraehra just stood there staring at her father, and for a while she was unable to say anything. "No, no, this has to be some sort of mistake", she finally said weakly, looking at her father for support, but Daehron shook his head subtly, a devastated look on his eyes.

"What was uncle even doing leading a retinue? And why was Jaevon with him?" Eraehra asked these questions with strict and angered tone, but there were no answers. "This doesn't make sense, this can't be right."

"I am afraid it is, Eraehra", Daehron finally said with a grim tone. "I remember you saying some time ago that you admired the culture of the Rhoynar... I guess they aren't as great as you claim them to be." After hearing this, Eraehra ran from the great hall, bursting into tears. Eraehra ran through the courtyard, the wind making her silver hair flow, and tears running down her cheeks. Once she reached her chambers, she buried her face in her pillow, weeping as the memories of her younger brother came racing through her mind. She remembered the time Jaevon had walked in on her studies. It had been earlier that same day when her father had furiously forbidden her from studying foreign cultures and histories.

Eraehra remembered the playful smirk on Jaevon's face as he found her once again being mentored by Maemar. "Well, well, well, what do we have here? A rule breaker perhaps", Eraehra remembered him saying gleefully. In order to keep her secret Jaevon had demanded Eraehra to tell him what Maemar was teaching her. This had surprised Eraehra, but she gladly shared with her brother the information about Dothrakies that Maemar had just told her.

"Hordes of over ten thousand horse warriors, you say? That is awesome!" Jaevon excitedly proclaimed as Eraehra had finished her lecture. "Well, I'm glad you found all this interesting", She responded with a raised eyebrow.

"Hey Eraehra, you did not really think I was going to tell father, did you?" Jaevon asked softly, and Eraehra looked at him inquisitively. With the warmest smile on his face, Jaevon said the words Eraehra would always remember, "You know I love you, sis."

Those words echoing in her head, Eraehra wiped the tears from her eyes, letting out a weak sigh. Another memory came to her mind - something that had occurred on the day Jaevon left with Uncle Jaegaron. Right before he had to leave, he had pulled Eraehra aside. "Hey sis, I know you're planning to go and see many exciting places... When I come back, could you take me somewhere?" He had asked, a genuine look on his eyes.

"Of course, I'll take you wherever you want to go, Jaevon", she had answered gently, and a weak smile was formed on her brother's face. "Do you promise?" He asked. Eraehra looked at him intently and answered, "Yes, I promise."

A few weeks after the news had arrived, there was a funeral for the fallen members of the Galnaris family. At the funeral, Eraehra touched the coffin of her younger brother. *I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise, she thought with sadness.* Eraehra held her brother's favorite dagger in her hand and whispered, "However, I will always take a part of you with me, wherever my journeys take me... and I will remember the people who did this to you." Eraehra backed away, and a flaming arrow landed into Jaevon's coffin and bursted it into flames, as the Galnaris family looked on. The fire reflected in Eraehra's violet eyes, as she thought about those who had taken her brother's life. *The Rhoynar.*

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Malcolm Dayne - Family

Winter is not just coming, winter is here. The ominous words of House Stark rang truer than ever as the freezing winds from beyond the Wall and the seemingly never ending snows from the Lands of Always Winter reigned supreme over the whole of Westeros, with such a might that is unparalleled to anything that had ever been seen before. The Maester's of Oldtown had sent ravens to every king and lord in Westeros proclaiming that winter was here, but surely even they were not prepared for this northern chill and the harsh conditions that came with it. Of course, Malcolm had heard and read plenty about the Long Night where winter ruled the Known World, but reading about an ancient winter that could well be nothing more than legend was very different from actually witnessing a harsh winter like this.

Admittedly, the Kingdom of the Torrentine had it easier than places like the North and the Vale, but nonetheless it was actually snowing in Starfall. This was Malcolm's first winter, but Uncle Garret had told him that winter usually just made the winds a bit crisper as they were situated on the coast. Even his father had never witnessed snow until now, which made Malcolm realize he could be one of the handful of Dayne's to ever see snows in Starfall. Considering that the Dayne's had ruled here for thousands of years, there was something truly special about this. *What a way to celebrate my tenth nameday*, Malcolm thought with a small smile on his face.

On this evening, Prince Malcolm was outside playing in the snow without a care in the world. It had snowed for a week straight, but it had been nowhere near cold enough to stick, at least until the night before and it carried over today through to the evening with the Starfall being covered with nearly one inch of snow. Malcolm figured it had to be some kind of record. Of course, as far as he knew, a new record had been made as soon as the first snowflake had touched the ground. Outside with Malcolm were Weslar Upton, the heir to Sword's Edge, and his younger brother Markas. The two oldest Upton brothers were very much like Malcolm, in different ways. Weslar even at the age of fourteen was already proving to be a worthy heir of his father's lands, while the twelve year old Markas despite his young age had proved honor was not a concept only shown by true knights and Northmen. While there were plenty of young children in Starfall serving as squires, Malcolm had to admit that these two were far different than most of them, because he considered these two true friends of his. While Malcolm got along and was friends with most of the other children, he also knew that as the crown prince he carried a burden they could simply not relate to. Malcolm knew he would never be a normal child, for he would be the next king and he had to show strength and maturity even at this young age. Regardless, King Vorian always made it

a point to tell Malcolm to enjoy his childhood, for he'd only get one, and on this evening that was what Malcolm was doing.

Malcolm and the Upton brothers had been playing outside for hours at this point, playing a wide array of games like Lord of the Crossing, as well as briefly playing Monsters and Maidens until most of the girls went inside because of the cold. Now, all three of their faces were red, and they were starting to feel the effects of the cold themselves. Together they were sitting around a fire made by the Starfall household guard, but they were the only ones there as all of the guards were patrolling their area. "Well, this has been fun", remarked Weslar as he put his hands and feet closer to the fire. "Who would have thought that we would actually get snow this far south? I heard father say that this is the first time that snow has reached Dorne ever since the Long Night. If I had to guess though, this is truly the first time ever that snow has reached Dorne, and hopefully the last time at that. The weather is miserable, I can't really say I know how the Northmen stand it." Markas raised an eyebrow to his older brother's words. "The Long Night was real, brother, and honestly this winter scares me", he said with a serious tone. "The last time that the winter was this cold, the White Walkers came south. Anyway, we are still lucky to be in Dorne – we are barely getting any snow as it is, all of it was melting before it hit the ground until last night. Still, this is not good. I can imagine if we are getting this much snow, the North is getting at least ten times as much. We should be grateful that we are here and not there." Weslar put his hand on his brother's shoulder, telling him "I know you're obsessed with the North and the honorable Night's Watch that guards us from grumpkins and snarks, but as I have told you time and again, the Wall is just an alternative to give criminals a purpose and low born sons an opportunity for leadership, nothing more. You and I are Upton's of Sword's Edge, which means we have a real purpose – we are the last defenders before Starfall. We have a real job to do, unlike the Night's Watch." Malcolm noticed that Weslar's speech annoyed Markas greatly, but he only muttered "whatever" with quiet anger.

Figuring it was time to change the subject, Malcolm decided to join the conversation. "So, will you guys be staying here or are you heading back to Sword's Edge?" He asked with genuinely interested tone. With a sigh, Markas disappointingly said, "We will be heading back to Sword's Edge in a couple of days. Our little brother Alester will be the only one staying here. I feel sorry for him really, he told us and father that we were abandoning him, and he has barely said a word to any of us ever since we left Sword's Edge." Weslar rolled his eyes and with a chuckle reminded his little brother, "Alester is a nine year old boy, don't worry too much about his anger. Father is doing him a great service, whether he realizes it or

not. Someday he will be a knight of the Torrentine trained by the best knights in all of Dorne. He will contribute greatly to our house, even if he'll never be a leader. You and I are the first two sons, Markas, meaning we have a duty to learn to lead while we earn our knighthoods. Sad as it is, our father won't be around forever." Malcolm gulped nervously at Weslar's words, but the Upton's did not seem to notice, and now the heir to Sword's Edge smirked. "Prince Malcolm, we haven't seen him all day and I have to ask, where Prince Jamison is?" Weslar asked with touch of amusement in his words. "He has been far too quiet today which is very much unlike him." Shrugging his shoulders, Malcolm nonchalantly told them, "I am not really sure where he is right now. Earlier, father said that Jamison spent all morning training with Ser Laroy, but that is all I have heard about him all day. Thinking about it, you are probably right Weslar. A quiet Jamison is not always the best one, no matter how refreshing it is not to listen to his boasting and complaining."

Well, we can say what we want about him, but that is dedication", Markas said with a surprised tone. "I mean, training out here today, considering most everyone has stayed indoors, especially that early in the morning when it had to be freezing." Weslar nodded and chuckled. "Well, Jamison is our prince and I do respect him, but the kid can still be an arrogant little shit sometimes", he said, which resulted in Malcolm and Markas busting out laughing uncontrollably, and it lasted for a moment before they were interrupted by Queen Arenna.

"Hello boys, I am sorry to interrupt your fun, but it is getting late and it's time for Malcolm to go inside. Also, Lord Samwell and Lady Alerah want you to head back to your chambers as well, they were worried sick about you two." With the chivalrous courtesy of two young lords, Weslar and Markas both bowed to their queen. "Of course, Your Grace, Markas and I will head back immediately." With those words, Weslar and Markas patted Malcolm on the back and they began making their way back toward the guest chambers. Meanwhile Arenna and Malcolm walked toward the main castle.

Back inside the warmth of the castle the tiredness that Malcolm had felt only mildly outside, was now starting to come on full force. Malcolm was ready to go to sleep, which his mother easily noticed. Now with her hand resting softly on Malcolm's shoulder, Malcolm looked at her and Malcolm could quickly tell from her face that something was not right. With a worried tone, Malcolm asked, "What is wrong mother? Is everything okay?" Queen Arenna bent down and hugged Malcolm tightly, letting out a sigh. "Your father wants all of us to come to his office. He has something that he needs to tell us", the Queen explained. More and more questions came to Malcolm's mind, as he felt like his mother was not telling him everything,

but he decided to wait because he knew he would find out what he needed to know soon enough.

Now arriving to King Vorian's office, he walked into a very normal occurrence in their household. Vorian was berating his little brother Jamison over something while his half sister Nealia sat in the chair beside her father's desk, watching it unfold with a smirk. "Why would you take Elissa Ladybright's dress while she was taking a bath?" Vorian asked, clearly annoyed and astonished by Jamison's actions. "You completely disrespected her privacy, which is never an appropriate thing to do to a lady." With a mischievous smirk on his face, and an arrogance that made him think he was the biggest person in the room even though he was clearly the smallest, Jamison looked up to their father and chuckled. "It is quite simple really, I went over to the Palestone Sword and was talking to Arthur Wythmail and Ser Brandon Sand, who were guarding the tower. They were both talking about how they wanted to see Elissa Ladybright without a dress, so I told them that I would do it before either of them ever would, and I won!" Jamison spoke with clearly satisfied tone, while Nealia rolled her eyes. Their mother blushed, and looked like she was not sure what to say. Vorian on the other hand was clearly aggravated with what he just heard. Right before he was about to speak though, Jamison chimed in again looking clearly confused, "I do have one question though, father, Elissa looked... different then what I do without clothes. Why is that?" Admittedly, Malcolm was confused by this as well since he was not entirely sure what Jamison meant, but he looked over at their mother, who muttered quietly, "Well that does explain why Elissa acted so odd around me earlier today."

Nealia now decided to speak up, looking at Jamison. "You're so stupid Jamison, you really don't know why she looked....different?" She asked with a mocking tone, but Jamison quickly came back in defense. "Shut up Nealia!" He snapped. "What would you know about this anyway?" Nealia rolled her eyes and reminded Jamison, "I am a girl you know, so I believe I have more of an idea than you would." At this point, Nealia and Jamison broke into an argument, with Malcolm not really even being able to understand what they were saying since they were talking so fast. Finally, Vorian silenced the room. "Enough!" he said with a stern voice. "This will not be discussed any longer, I did not bring you all in here just so we could argue... especially about this."

Now with serious and disappointed words, Vorian began "Today, I received a raven from Blackmont. It says that my sister, and your aunt, Valaena has passed on from this world." When Vorian finished talking, the room was in complete silence. Nealia turned her eyes down quietly, while Jamison's face showed absolute anger. He put his head into their

mother's shoulder, who pulled her sons in closer with a soft sigh. Vorian himself was now visibly upset, so much that he had to take a pause, putting his hands into his face. Malcolm had sat quietly through the meeting so far, but now he knew what was truly wrong and he had to speak up. "Aunt Valaena died, but how? She was in perfect health, this makes no sense", he said glancing at his father and mother, waiting for them to give the answers. Suddenly Malcolm realized he had hardly seen Gwendis and Naemon all day, and this certainly explained it. They had come to Starfall a while ago, and on any normal day they were always around having fun and playing games with the rest of them. Or in Jamison's and Naemon's case, they were always getting into fights. "Where is Gwendis and Naemon? Are they okay?" Malcolm asked this with a very worried tone, but quickly his father reassured him. "Gwendis and Naemon are alright, don't worry. I let them know about what had happened just a little bit ago, and right now your mother's handmaiden Elissa is watching over them. They will be heading back to Blackmont as soon as the weather permits itself." Vorian glanced over at Jamison as he said this.

Malcolm felt such a massive pit in his stomach about what he had just heard. Two cousins who he cared for deeply would have to deal with something that really seemed unimaginable to him. He could not understand why this happened, Aunt Valaena was such a good person, and she was so young as well, this should not have happened. Malcolm's disappointing thoughts were interrupted by his little brother, whose words were not filled with the usual arrogance, but rather of shock and disappointment. "But... how could the knights of Blackmont let this happen?" He asked strictly. "They have knights and a household guard just the same as we do, they are supposed to protect the Queen. It is their job, they swore an oath." Vorian looked at Jamison with sadness and it seemed he truly did not know what to say. "The message they sent us states that Valaena died from a sudden illness. There is little that knights can't do to protect from something like that, and even maesters and healers are sometimes powerless to help", the King explained with sorrowful tone. Malcolm looked over at Jamison, and with sadness he said to his brother, "It must have just been her time to go." Jamison looked over at Malcolm and suddenly Jamison's sadness turned into anger. "Hold on! Naemon told me earlier that he heard his father was dabbling in black magic. I thought he was lying and just wanting attention, but maybe he is right. What if Uncle Benedict killed her?" Vorian tried to dismiss what Jamison just said, but with all of the courage the eight year old boy could muster, he would have none of it. "Uncle Benedict did kill her, why else would he send Gwendis and Naemon here and not have Aunt Valaena come down with them? He wanted them gone so he could kill her without their children around. Uncle Benedict is a monster, father you should kill him!" Jamison shouted, and Malcolm could just sense the

anger and disappointment in his brother's words. With a comforting tone, Malcolm reminded Jamison, "We have met Uncle Benedict before, he is a good man and he loved Aunt Valaena with all of his heart, there is no way he would do such an appalling thing. But father, I really don't understand how she could have died either. She was so young. I mean, I remember when grandfather died, but he was old and I know that eventually everyone dies but there's no way that it was her time yet! Something must have been up, I don't think that Uncle Benedict killed her, but something odd had to have happened there."

Malcolm looked at his father and for once it seemed that the calm and composed king was not composed nor was he calm. It was clear that he was shaken and upset just the same as everyone else is, probably even more so. With his voice nearly shaking, King Vorian told Malcolm, "They said she died of an illness, Malcolm, there is nothing more that can be done. As sad as it is to say, not everyone gets to live a long life. There are some people who die well before their time should be up, and unfortunately it seems that my sister will be one of those people." At this point, Malcolm felt like crying, but he knew he had to stay strong like father. However, Malcolm glanced over at his little brother who was in their mother's arms, and tears rapidly streaming down his face. "Please father, please tell me, you would never hurt mother like that... that... demon hurt our aunt?" He pleaded with sobbing, and pushed his face into their mother's arms and wrapped his arms around her. Vorian looked shocked of Jamison's words. "Of course not, my dear son, that would never happen", he answered quietly.

At this point, the whole room had gone silent with feelings of anger, shock, and disappointment all in one. Malcolm looked around the room, seeing Vorian looking down at his desk nearly on the brink of tears, Arenna silently crying as she held little Jamison in her arms, and Nealia sat in her seat with a sad look on her eyes. Malcolm, who was sitting beside their mother, felt the tears coming to his eyes. Then, Vorian spoke up again. Holding back how clearly distraught he was, he calmly reminded his family, "For as much as Valaena means to all of us, her two children feel it far more than any of us ever will. They have lost their mother, there is a massive hole in their hearts now that can never truly be filled. For while we have lost a sister or an aunt, they have lost a loving mother, who brought them in this world and cared for them deeply. There is nothing we can say that can fix what has happened, but we must be there for them, as much as we can be. And we will make sure that they know we are here for them, always. As for Valaena, there is nothing that could bring her back now, but we still have our memories of her and while she won't be here anymore, her memory will live on forever. As sad as it is to say, her death reminds us more

than ever that family is a precious thing, and the presence of our loved ones is never something that we should take for granted.” With those words, he got up from his chair, and put his hand on Nealia’s shoulder, calling the rest of the family over to them. Malcolm, Jamison and Queen Arenna walked over to Nealia and Vorian and they all embraced with one big hug, an array of emotions going through them all. Malcolm felt horribly bad for Gwendis and Naemon, for the loss that they have suffered. He also prayed to the gods with all of his heart, for them to keep his family together, and to make sure it would be a very long time before Malcolm would become king.

Out of the corner of his eye, Malcolm glanced out of the window where a torch lit up the night sky. He saw the snow falling harder than ever, and the winds whipping at a rapid pace. However, through it all, he saw the large banner of House Dayne flapping strongly and enduring the storm. That image meant a lot to Malcolm, and he prayed that it would hold true. He hoped his family would be together and endure this storm, as well as all the storms that would come their way in the future. Malcolm knew that family was strongest when they stuck together, and now more than ever that was what they had to do. Yet no matter how dark the night would get, Malcolm trusted that the words of his house would come true in the end. *Dawn Brings the Light.*

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Varyn of Chroyane – Loyalty

Once, the farmhouse was likely the home for a family of four or five at least. Now, it served for a far more sinister purpose. It was large for its kind, at least as far as Varyn was able to see in the moonlight. Though only a single story, it had a large barn and stables, undoubtedly for the horses. He slowed his own horse down as he rode across the path to the house. It lay silently in the vast plains that surrounded it and he had no doubt that they would hear him. Without even the tiniest cover in the flat lands, he had no doubt they even saw him. The soldier inside Varyn protested against this reckless strategy. The general ignored him.

Varyn brought his horse to a full stop in front of the house, before he slowly descended from it. Spotting a pole, he tied the reins to it, before he softly stroke the animal's mane. Only then did he turn to the door. By now, he was sure that they were watching him through one of the windows, though only one was illuminated. A single candle stood in the window just next to the door. The sign they agreed to. He had come to the right place.

Carefully, he approached the door and waited, straightening his back. His right hand reached for his left forearm, as he closed his eyes, trying to ease his breath. He hated to admit it, but a part of him was afraid of what he would find in there. Of what he was about to do.

His hopes were crushed when the door got opened. A familiar face stood there, illuminated by the light of a small candle. The man was tanned, with a short beard and warm, brown eyes. His mouth formed a grin and Varyn reciprocated the gesture. "General!", he said, as he fully opened the door. "Captain Orik", Varyn greeted him, extending the right hand and giving the other man a firm handshake.

"Glad you could make it", Orik said. "This wouldn't be possible without you" Varyn gave him a quiet nod. "I am interested in what you have to say", he explained. "Your offer was... tempting" Orik smirked, as he closed the door behind the general. They stood in a small entrance room, only illuminated by the light of the candle, as the captain walked through it with three quick steps, to open the door at the other side of it.

Behind it, Varyn saw a more brighter room, the windows closed, several people looking at him through the doorframe. Varyn frowned as he recognized one of them, a pot-bellied beast of a man, with a bushy beard and a near-constant frown on his scarred face. Tamor, formerly the High Admiral of the Rhoynar fleet, now admiral of nothing, demoted to a lower-ranking general. Come to think of it, his presence wasn't all that surprising. There was little love between Varyn and Tamor, a rivalry that went back for decades and eventually turned into a bitter grudge when Princess Nymeria led their people away from their homelands.

As he entered the room, he was quick to count three others. There was a small man, who was sitting to his left in a comfy chair. He smirked as the general entered and twirled his thin mustache. At the other end of the room, behind a large table, sat a young, dark-haired man, slightly on the chubby side. It was warm in the room, but Varyn had the impression that the sweat running down the man's forehead was not only a result of the heat. Behind him stood a man whom Varyn immediately recognized as a soldier. He didn't know the man himself, but he recognized the posture, the position behind what was probably his leader and especially the weapon in his hands, a crossbow.

Other than the unusual inhabitants, the farmhouse looked exactly as he imagined a dornish farm to look from the inside. There was a fireplace, a larger table and chairs, fresh fruit presented on it. Behind the chubby man's desk, towards the table, Varyn spotted a large washing tub, filled with water.

“Prince Varyn”, the chubby man greeted him and only with sheer power of will did Varyn resist the urge to frown. “General”, he corrected him politely. “Garin was the Prince of Chroyane” His straightforwardness took the man slightly by surprise, so he used the opportunity to continue. “Captain Orik invited me to this meeting, though he failed to introduce me to any of you”

“Oh, I'm sure you recognize me, Prince Varyn”, Tamor growled, as he approached him. This time, Varyn narrowed his eyes. “High Admiral Tamor”, he said. “I almost did not recognize you without your ships” This caused the former admiral to clench his fists, though the chubby man quickly raised from his chair. “Mylords, please!”, he said sharply. “We are all allies here, united by a common goal. We are here to plan the death of Princess Nymeria. Foreign invader to some of us, usurper to others”

“Usurper!”, Orik agreed. “Garin's body wasn't even cold when she declared herself as his successor. And a coward, who abandoned our homes. I wouldn't be surprised if she conspired with the Valyrians” Tamor nodded enthusiastically. “She destroyed our fleet, weakening us, forcing us to live in these lands”, he spoke up. “She plans to make us slaves to the dornish”

Both men looked at Varyn, Orik with a reassuring smile, Tamor with a distrustful glare. The general sighed. “Garin is my prince, now and forever”, he spoke. “Nymeria is a foolish girl and her ambition will be our doom”

The chubby man smiled. “Well said, mylords”, he complimented them. “Now, Tamor and Orik already know me, but you, General Varyn, are new to our circle. Captain Orik vowed for your trustworthiness and I agree with him. Your opinion on Princess Nymeria is not a secret”

Orik nodded. “Nobody hates her more than the general”, he assured him. “And nobody will be more valuable to our cause than the general. Without him, the rhoynish army would have perished at Chroyane. Every single one of our soldiers owes him their lives”

“Just like I owe you mine, captain”, Varyn said. “I have not forgotten your valiant charge at Selhorys” He patted the man on the back. Yes, Orik was a friend, perhaps one of the closest he still had after Garin's death. Cautiously, he glanced at the chubby man. “I know what you plan to do and I am glad Orik informed me of it. His report gained my interest”

"Splendid!", the chubby man explained, before he put a hand onto his chest. "May I introduce myself. My name is Oswyn Bloodspill" The mention of the house caused Varyn to narrow his eyes. "You are sworn to Mors Martell", he said. "Why would you turn on him?"

Oswyn chuckled. "My family holds no love for the man who married a foreign, landless whore", he stated harshly and Varyn took a deep breath. Tamor narrowed his eyes. "Have you checked him for weapons, Orik?", he growled and the captain threw a confused glance at the former admiral. "Are you serious?", he asked in return. "This is Varyn. Tamor, you know we can trust him"

"Have you?", Tamor growled, as he glared at Varyn, who met the glare with one of his own. Orik sighed. "Yes", he barked. "And now, no more of this. Nobody is more loyal to our people than Varyn and you know it!" Reluctantly, under the glare of both, Varyn and Orik, the admiral backed down. "Fine", he said. "It can't be a bad idea to be careful in these days"

Ignoring him, Varyn turned back to Oswyn. "So, our group is backed by House Bloodspill?", he asked and Oswyn gave him an enthusiastic nod. "And more", he promised. "But none so powerful than my family. Mors Martell's decision to support Nymeria and even marry her has given him numerous enemies. Men like myself, who will not stand idle while he is about to destroy us all"

He glanced at the small man who sat next to Varyn on the chair. He was clad in decidedly less lavish robes than Oswyn, yet as he spoke, he still showed a certain culture in his voice. "General, it is my pleasure. My name is Zontar and I am here in the name of several merchants who have decided to back House Bloodspill in this conspiracy"

"A mere merchant?", Varyn asked. "What would you have from indulging yourselves in such affairs" Zontar smirked. "Peace", he said. "Stability. Nymeria seeks to end these things" He put a hand onto his chest. "I sell wine from the northern kingdoms, from the Reach and the Stormlands. My caravans pass through lands that belong to House Blackmont, House Manwoody and House Dryland. For now, they ignore Nymeria's declaration of war, but once she starts to pose a threat to them, do you think they would allow my men to pass through their lands?" He shook his head. "And I am not the only one. I deliver my goods to a local inn. The innkeeper depends on my wine to keep his customers happy. His neighbour is a blacksmith, who receives iron from the mines in the Red Mountains. They all buy meat from a man who feeds his cattle on the fertile plains that belong to House Toland", he explained.

“Trust me, it's not only the high lords who disagree with your princess and her actions. Nothing good will come from Nymeria's war”

Varyn gave him a nod. “This is something me and you agree upon”, he told him truthfully. “I tried to convince Nymeria of how futile her ambition is. The foolish girl refused to listen. She deserves your ire. And that is why I am here” He put his attention back to Oswyn. “Once we have disposed of Nymeria and her husband, what are your plans?”

Oswyn smiled proudly. “Naturally, House Bloodspill will take control of the Sandship. My uncle will install my father as its lord and me as its heir. The Rhoynar will need a new ruler, whom they shall elect themselves”, he explained. “Those of you that wish to stay are welcome to submit to the rule of House Bloodspill. Unlike your current ruler however, we will not force you to stay here. Admiral Tamor has expressed his desire to leave, so we shall support him with building a new fleet. But no matter how your people decide, there will always be friendship between them and House Bloodspill”

“This sounds like a noble offer”, Varyn said. “Are there any other influential men who are willing to support our conspiracy? You have me, there is House Bloodspill, the former admiral, a collective of merchants, but you know just as well as I do that we won't have more than one chance to kill her and Mors. We need further allies”

Oswyn gave him a nod. “Oh, we have them”, he assured him. “Trust me, our allies are more powerful than you might think” Varyn narrowed his eyes, as he forced himself to breathe calmly. “Whom?” he asked. This time, Tamor once again glared at him. The former admiral came closer, until Varyn stood directly between him and Orik. And Varyn realized that he suspected something. He had to change his strategy.

“Son of a...”, Tamor growled just as Varyn reached for the dagger in his sleeve. With a single movement, he cut through the admiral's neck, before using the same move to push the dagger into Captain Orik's throat just a second later. The man's eyes widened, but Varyn's expression remained a cold glare. Orik had been his friend, a man who had saved his life. But this man was dead to him, he had died the moment he revealed his part in this conspiracy. For the traitor he had just killed, Varyn felt nothing but hatred.

“What the...!”, Oswyn exclaimed and Varyn knew he had to act quickly now. He jumped over the bleeding admiral, who was on all fours and clutching the fatal wound on his neck. His hand grabbed Zontar the merchant by the throat and he dragged him between himself and Bloodspill's soldier, just as the man had raised his crossbow.

“What the fuck!”, Oswyn screamed, now in a state of panic. In his arms, Zontar began to breathe rapidly. “Oh no...”, he gasped. “Oh gods no...” Apparently, he was quicker to realize what had happened. And he was completely aware of how disposable he was. Holding him as a human shield, Varyn glared at the soldier. “Come on, traitor”, he barked. “Shoot, I dare you”

“What is happening?”, Oswyn demanded to know with a shrill voice, as he looked at the dead Captain Orik and the dying Admiral Tamor. “What are you doing?” Varyn coldly glared at him. “You think you're safe”, he spat. “You think this was a perfect plan, that you had it all figured out, that nothing could go wrong” He shook his head. “You just made one mistake, when you dared to question my loyalty” Panicked, Oswyn looked at his soldier. “What are you waiting for?”, he gasped. “Shoot him!” The man gulped. “I can't get a clean shot, Ser”, he said.

In Varyn's arms, Zontar squirmed. “Please...”, he begged and looked up at the general. “Please, no, I don't want to die! I only wanted peace. Please don't kill me, just let me go, I am no threat to anyone, I promise I will keep quiet about this, plea...” He was cut off when the crossbowman took the shot. As Varyn had expected it, the bolt hit Zontar instead of him, entering the merchant's right eye and stopping when it reached the back of his head. Now, without hesitating, he let go of the corpse, raised his dagger and threw it at the soldier. He felt grim satisfaction when the weapon entered the man's chest, causing him to fall to the ground.

Oswyn's eyes widened, as he raised his hands. “Oh no...”, he gulped and Varyn spotted a dark, wet stain on the man's trousers. “I... I... I... we, can... work something out, I have information...” He glanced at the crossbow, which had fallen onto the desk when Varyn had killed the soldier.

All of a sudden, something unexpected happened. A massive figure raised from the ground, grabbing Varyn at the collar with a roar of anger, of hatred. Admiral Tamor, bleeding out but still alive, pushed the far lighter general against the wall. Varyn was unable to stop the admiral in his rage.

“Traitor!”, he screamed at the top of his lungs. “Traitor! You have always been a traitor! Garin would still be alive if it wouldn't be for you. A coward, a traitor! You should have led your men to battle, you should have helped our prince! We lost the war thanks to you, we lost our home thanks to you and you have the nerve to pose as a hero? Coward!”

For just a moment, Varyn was stunned by the accusations, before he himself was overwhelmed with anger. He raised his hand, pushing the fingers into Tamor's left eye socket, where he heavily squeezed the eye. Bellowing in agony, the admiral's grip got weaker and as Varyn pulled his hand back, he held the eyeball still in his fingers.

Gasping in shock and finally having lost enough blood, Tamor collapsed, clutching the lethal wound on his neck and the far less lethal but far more painful wound on his face. This time, Varyn left the dying man, as he charged at Oswyn. The young nobleman had used the momentary distraction Tamor had given him to reach for the crossbow.

A skilled soldier would have reloaded and fired the weapon by now. Bloodspill however was just finished with the former task as Varyn reached him. He pushed the crossbow aside, the bolt flying far past him and hitting the ceiling, as he gave Oswyn a heavy punch against the throat. The nobleman collapsed, dropping the crossbow, as he clutched his throat, desperately gasping for air.

His eyes narrowed and a terrifying glare on his face, Varyn grabbed the sobbing Oswyn, pulling him over to the washing tub right behind him. "Who else is involved in the conspiracy?", he growled. With what little defiance he had left, Bloodspill glared at him. "I will tell you nothing!", he spat and just as he opened his mouth again, Varyn pushed his head into the tub.

He held him there until Bloodspill began to flail around, his arms weakly hitting the wood of the tub and Varyn's body. As he pulled him up again, any sign of defiance had faded from the young man's eyes, as he gasped for air. "Who else is involved in the conspiracy?", he repeated his question, notably louder this time.

"Nobody!", Bloodspill tried to claim, but Varyn instantly pushed him below the water again, holding him for a bit longer this time. "Who else?", he barked and Oswyn was sobbing as he pulled him up again. "Cap...", he gasped. "Captain Vosk" Varyn narrowed his eyes. "The captain of the castle guard", he mumbled. "It seems I have to replace him. Who else?"

Bloodspill shook his head. "Those are all I know, I swear, I don't know anyone else!", he begged, but Varyn knew no mercy. He pushed the young man below the water again and held him longer than before. "WHO ELSE!", he screamed at the top of his lungs and Bloodspill screamed as well, not in anger, but in naked fear.

"Wait, wait!", he gasped, between two desperate breaths, before Varyn pushed him into the tub again. "Why?", he exclaimed as he was able to breathe again and this time, Varyn

narrowed his eyes. "Why?", he growled and Oswyn nodded desperately. "Why are you still loyal to her?", he asked, as he tried to regain his breath. "Garin was your prince. She is a usurper"

Varyn narrowed his eyes. Without any mercy, he pushed the young man under the water again, but only briefly this time, before he pulled him up again. As he continued to speak, his voice was cold and filled with anger. "Garin was my prince and I would have followed him to hell and back", he snarled. "I loved him more than you could ever imagine. I will not dishonour his memory by betraying his successor!"

Oswyn's eyes widened. "But you hate her!", he said. "You criticized her for her decision, you did in public and everyone was able to hear it! How can you be loyal to a woman you don't even like?" He let out a short scream, which was quickly drowned by the water, as Varyn pushed him below again.

"Loyalty!", the general roared. "It is the pillar of my life. The one thing I will never give up on. Loyalty to my people and to my princess. It doesn't matter if I like her, or even respect her. She is my leader, just like Garin was. I will follow her now and forever, no matter what she orders me to do. I will criticize her, I will disagree with her, but never, NEVER will I betray her!"

Though Oswyn began to flail around and against the tub, Varyn continued to hold him down in naked anger. "But what does a worm like you know about loyalty, a rat?", he screamed. "You have no honour, no loyalty. Your life is worth nothing!" Below the water, he heard the young man's desperate screams, but Varyn did not stop. "Loyalty goes beyond personal affection, beyond agreement. Without loyalty, I am nothing. And you..." He pulled him up again. "WHO ELSE?", he barked.

This time, he noticed that there would be no answer. Oswyn Bloodspill's body had gotten limp. His eyes were opened widely in the fear he felt as he died. With disgust at the dead body, Varyn let go of him and he sank back into the washing tub he died in.

With a sigh, Varyn himself turned around, leaning against the wood. This was it. There would be no other names. If Oswyn even knew any, his knowledge had died with him. But this was not the end of the conspiracy. Varyn felt naked anger rising inside of him as he thought of this. Vorn, captain of the castle guard, would be his next target. The man would confess to the princess and then...

His glance fell upon the corpse of Captain Orik and for the first time in this night, Varyn felt a sting of regret. They had been friends, once. He could never be friends with a traitor, but once, Orik had been a brilliant man, a war hero and a loyal soldier. A man he considered a friend. Even Tamor had been different once. And not for the first time, Varyn had to ask himself how many good men and women Nymeria's war would claim. A foolish war, started by a foolish leader. But even now, he could never betray her. Tamor had been right with one thing. It was his fault that Garin died. And Nymeria was his punishment.

With a groan of discomfort, General Varyn of Chroyane pushed himself up, away from the tub. He sighed bitterly. "There's a lot to do", he mumbled to himself.

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Gwendis Blackmont – Ambition

"Gwendis", her father said softly. "Wake up. She felt the bed moving under his weight, as he lay down next to her, his hand gently moving through her hair. A smile formed on her face, as she tried her best not to move, while her father started to tickle her neck. "Little Gwen, wake up", he whispered in her ear and she giggled. "Wake up"

"Let the child sleep, Ben", her mother added. "If she does not want to, she doesn't have to. I can deal with them on my own. The lords and knights and commoners of Blackmont. Let's just leave, she needs her sleep" Her father stopped tickling her neck. "Hm, you have a point, Val", he replied. Once again, the bed moved as he stood up again. "Good night, my little princess", he added.

Instantly, Gwendis jumped up. "Wait!", she yelled and her parents turned around, both smiling. "Wait for me!" In fact, she had waited for them. She knew that today would be a big day and she had been looking forward for it for... a long time, yes. She was even dressed already, having lied down in her bed awake for what must have been hours. She rushed towards her parents and into her father's open arms. He lifted her up and she squealed in joy as he turned around. For a moment, Gwendis felt as if she could fly. Then, he put her into her mother's arms, who gently let her back to the ground.

"Oh, now you want to come?", she asked and with childish enthusiasm, Gwendis nodded. "I want to see the lords", she said. "And the knights and even the commoners" She frowned. "Even if they stink" Mother raised an eyebrow. "Really?", she asked. "Who said they stink?"

“Naemon”, she answered truthfully, her eyes widely opened, wondering if she just said something wrong. However, her mother just mildly shook her head. “Oh, that boy”, she mumbled with a smile. “Commoners don't stink, not more than lords or knights”

“True”, a voice from the doorframe sounded and Ser Kegan Drinkwater glanced into the room. “Good morning, princess”, the young knight said and Gwendis gave him a polite curtsy, like the one her mother showed her. “Ser Kegan”, she greeted him.

“No, really”, Kegan continued. “In my day, I have met a couple of commoners who smelled very nice, particularly the women” A confused look appeared on Gwendis' face, while her father grinned knowingly. Her mother though narrowed her eyes. “Kegan”, she said sharply. “My daughter is six years old. She doesn't have to hear this”

Apologetically, Kegan gave her a nod. “Apologies, your grace. Little princess”, he said, before he turned to the king. “One of your... guests wishes to speak to you, my king” Instantly, Gwendis noticed how her mother's smile faded. Father sighed, though he gave Ser Kegan a nod. “Tell him I'll be there in a minute”

“Benedict”, Mother said sharply and her father looked at her. He reached for her hand. “This could be important”, he told her. “Some of the newcomers, Val, they have powers of a kind you cannot imagine” Mother narrowed her eyes. “Of a kind I don't want to imagine”, she replied. “Is this really necessary? Your court awaits”

Father gave her a nod, before he lovingly kissed her hand. “You can do this as well”, he said. “And make sure that Gwendis learns a thing or two” Mother sighed in frustration, though the smile she gave Gwendis was sweet and warm. “Gweny, why don't you wait outside? Me and your father have to discuss something”

Gwendis gulped as she saw them like this. “But... but please don't fight”, she said. To this, her mother smiled. “I promise you, we won't”, she answered. Reluctantly, Gwendis followed her wish, as she stepped out into the hallway, hearing her mother closing the door behind her.

She glanced around, hoping to see Ser Kegan somewhere. He was nice. And indeed she saw him, standing on the other end of the hallway, where he looked out of one of the windows that overlooked the valley. As she approached him, her gaze fell onto the open door to her right and to the man who almost looked as if he wanted to hide in the shadows behind.

He was the tallest man Gwendis had ever seen, perhaps the tallest man in the entire world. He was taller than Ser Kegan, even taller than father. Most of his face was hidden behind a hood, something Gwendis considered to be very suspicious, though he had a very short beard.

Taking a deep breath, she stopped next to him and he looked down at her from below his hood. "Can I help you?", she asked sharply. "These are the royal quarters!" The man smirked and she narrowed her eyes at his amusement. He wasn't taking her seriously, but then again, Gwendis knew enough of the world to know that a girl of six years might not have the most authority.

"Is that so?", he replied. His voice was strange, with an accent Gwendis had never heard before. "Then I am quite right here, for I wish to speak to King Benedict. You must be Queen Valaena, I presume" Being compared to her mother caused Gwendis to blush and though she did not trust this man, a smile appeared on her face. "Close", she answered. "I am Gwendis Blackmont, nice to meet you!" Politely, as her mother had taught her, she extended her hand and the hooded man shook her. His own hand was twice as big as hers and oddly cold, despite the heat inside the castle.

"Syrenho of Lys", he introduced himself. "My princess, it is an honour. Had I known that Blackmont was home to such a smart little girl, I would have brought presents" Gwendis' smile faded. "I don't need presents", she said. "I'm not a little girl after all. I am almost seven"

Syrenho raised an eyebrow. "I see", he replied. "Well, but my presents are presents for grown ups. I create potions. Perhaps when your high father considers it suitable, I can give you a taste of what I have to offer"

Just as Gwendis was about to answer, the door got thrown open and Mother walked out, visibly frustrated. Her glare fell upon the hooded man and she approached both. "What are you doing with my daughter?", she demanded to know and Gwendis smiled brightly. "Mother, this is Syrenho", she said. "He is nice"

Syrenho bowed down in front of Mother. "Syrenho of Lys, my Queen Valaena", he said. "It is my pleasure. Tales of your beauty have reached my ears before and I see the truth exceeds them by far" He smiled, quite charmingly as Gwendis thought and gave the princess a wink. "May I add, your daughter seems to grow up as your spitting image"

Mother's glare hadn't faded, not in the slightest. "Spare me the flattery", she growled. "Your lot has to stay away from my daughter at all times, have I made myself clear?" Syrenho was

quick to nod. "Apologies, my queen", he said. "Your daughter approached me, to be honest. But I can assure you, we only had a nice chat"

In this moment, Father entered the hallway and Mother turned towards him. "Benedict", she said and pointed at Syrenho. "This man has talked to our daughter!" Concern appeared on her father's face, as he approached them. He glanced at the hooded man. "Syrenho, is that right?", he asked.

Now, Syrenho smiled. "Ah, your grace remembers my name", he said. "Yes, I am Syrenho, the alchemist. Apologies for being so direct, but I have finished the potion your grace requested. It has to be consumed within the next hour and we have further preparations to make"

In confusion, Gwendis looked from her father, to Syrenho, to her mother. Mother was clearly displeased, but she didn't saw any reason to. The man hadn't done anything bad, right? He was looking scary, but he was nice. She liked him.

"I see...", Father said and Mother gave him a sharp glare. "Benedict, you know I don't want these people up here. What would have happened if I wouldn't have been around? Our daughter lives here, our son sleeps in the next room..."

Gwendis glanced at the door next to hers. Naemon's room. He was sleeping. She found it a bit unfair that he got to sleep longer. Sure, she wanted to be a part of today, while he had cried until Mother allowed him to sleep, but she still found it unfair. A yawn came out of her throat, louder than she had intended and Father looked at her. A smile formed on his face. "I think our little princess is bored", he said. "Come, Val, bring her to the throne room"

"I really think you should be present", Mother said and Father shook his head. "You have always been better than me", he answered. "I deal with Syrenho here and next time, I will sit on the throne again" Mother rolled her eyes, those purple eyes that were so similar to Gwendis', before she shot a glare towards the hooded man. "And you, stay away from my daughter", she barked.

Politely, Syrenho nodded. "As you wish, your grace", he promised. "But maybe we could continue this talk? I can assure you, my potions are harmless. Once you have the time, I can give you one that will make you feel more... lively"

Mother shook her head. "This will never happen", she promised. "And I don't need it. Two children are more than enough to keep me alive" She looked at Father. "Ben, make sure this

won't happen again. These... people talking to my daughter, nothing good can come out of this”

Father sighed, though he gave her a nod. “I will think of something, Valaena”, he promised. He came closer and gave her a loving kiss on the lips. Seeing this display of affection caused Gwendis to smile. She wanted the same one day, a man who truly loved her. But that wasn't all she wanted. There was more, a lot more.

As he looked at his daughter, Father sighed. “Seven, she looks so much like you”, he stated. Mother followed his gaze and smiled. “She got your eyes”, she replied. Father tilted his head to this. “She clearly has yours”, he said and Mother shook her head. “I don't mean how they look, but what's inside them”, she replied and Gwendis smiled brightly at the attention her parents gave her. “You had the same look when we first met. Ambition”

“Ambition”, Father replied, before he turned to Gwendis. “Have a good day, then, my ambitious little princess” He reached down, to put a hand onto Gwendis' tiny shoulder. She smiled at him. “You too, Father”, she answered, before she hugged him, giving him a soft kiss onto the chin. He chuckled at this, before he separated again from her. He and Mother shared a loving gaze, though Mother's was tarnished by worry, before they went their separate ways. Mother and Gwendis walked down the hallway, to where Ser Kegan was waiting, whereas Father and Syrenho remained behind, talking with muffled voices.

“What did he tell you?”, Mother asked and Gwendis raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”, she replied and Mother sighed. “This... Syrenho. What did he say?”, she demanded to know. To this, Gwendis rolled her eyes. “He was very nice, Mother”, she answered. “He was not bad”

Wordlessly, Ser Kegan joined them as they passed him and once they turned around the corner and out of the hooded man's sight, Mother grabbed Gwendis by the shoulder, kneeling down next to her. “Listen”, she said sternly. “I want you to remember one thing, always. These people, they may seem nice, they may act as if they are your friends, as if they have your best interests at heart, but don't trust them. They are not your friends and all they want is to ruin you”

The way she said these words caused Gwendis to gulp. Sudden worry hit her, as she glanced back the way they came. “Are they ruining father?” she asked. For a moment, Mother seemed less strong than usual, which was shocking to Gwendis. She had always been the strongest person in the world, the most beautiful and the nicest and most loving of

them all. Seeing her like this, it was not something Gwendis wanted to again. "I don't know, Gwen", she admitted. "I don't know"

Ser Kegan cleared his throat, gaining the attention of Gwendis and her mother. "I don't want to interrupt anything, your grace, but the lords are waiting", he said. Mother sighed. "Very well, Ser Kegan. Lead the way", she spoke. "Whom will I speak to today?"

"Lord Tomard Blackadder", he answered and he gave Gwendis a wink. "Or... Blackbladder, judging by the smell" Gwendis grinned widely, as a delicate chuckle came out of her mouth. Mother however sighed. "Kegan, what have I told you?", she said and Kegan shrugged apologetically. "Hey, your daughter liked it, my queen", he defended himself.

Mother threw a glance at Gwendis and smiled, a gesture that put full emphasis onto her beautiful face and caused the worry that had bothered her before to fall off. "Yes, I suppose that is correct", she answered. "Consider your apology accepted. What does he want, our dear Lord... Blackbladder?"

To this, Gwendis tried to suppress outright laughter and Kegan grinned as he noticed her joy. "It is nothing too important, your grace", he assured her. "Lord Tomard wishes for additional food to be sent to his villages. His people would starve otherwise. Well, I say if they are only half as fat as he is, they are just fine"

Mother's smile faded. "This is far from a small matter, Kegan", she told him and Gwendis was eager to hear what she had to say. "Our people shall not starve. Nothing can cause a kingdom to collapse as quickly as starving peasants. And Tomard is no fool. I will hear what he has to say"

Kegan nodded slowly. He glanced at Gwendis and his smile returned. "Listen closely what your mother has to say, little princess", he advised her. "She is a wise woman. The king can be glad to have someone like her at his side. Follow her advice and maybe you'll be a similar asset one day, at the side of your husband"

Gwendis nodded quickly. "Or maybe my husband will be at *my* side", she said with enthusiasm in her voice. Kegan raised an eyebrow and started to chuckle. "Well, you really need the right husband then", he answered. "A woman's role is to advise, not to lead"

To this, Gwendis looked at her mother in front of her. Kegan followed her glance, his gaze lingering on Mother for a little longer. "Our queen, she is a special one", he said with reverence in his voice. "One out of thousand are put into her position and out of those, only

one out of ten are any good at what they are doing. Blackmont couldn't have hoped for a better queen”

Mother looked over her shoulder and gave Kegan a bright smile. “Thank you, Ser”, she replied politely. “I am lucky to have my husband though. We shall see what lies ahead for Gwendis” Kegan nodded and Gwendis gave both a curious look. “What do you mean?”, she asked.

To this, Mother sighed. “One day, you will find a nice prince, one whom you will love and he will love you. You will marry and be his queen at his court”, she explained. Gwendis frowned at her words. Not so much at the loving part, that sounded nice, but the part where she had to leave her home. “And what court would this be?”

Kegan cleared his throat. “Albin Manwoody has a son in your age”, he replied, though Mother gave him a shocked look. “Not Manwoody”, she barked, before she sighed. “I don't know, Gwen. Maybe Ferris Fowler, or the Yronwood boy. Both men who will be king one day, men who could need a capable queen by their side”

Gwendis pressed her lips together. Gwendis Fowler... Gwendis Yronwood. They sounded wrong in the head of Gwendis Blackmont. Just wrong. Gwendis Manwoody? Seven, no! She shook her head. “Can I not stay here and be queen just like you?”, she asked thinly. “I don't want to be queen of somewhere else. This is my home!”

Mother raised an eyebrow, though she and Kegan exchanged a smile. “If you want to, my little princess”, she said. “If you want to, there is nothing you cannot do” Just in this moment, they had reached the doors of the Great Hall. Kegan walked past queen and princess, as he put his hands onto the doors. With a heavy groan, he pushed them open.

Behind, Gwendis saw a myriad of people. They must be hundreds and their voices formed a cacophony, even after the door got opened. There stood her father's guards, forming a gap through which the Queen of Blackmont, her daughter and the captain of the guard could pass.

With her mouth widely opened in astonishment and joyful surprise, Gwendis stared at the people. There were peasants, as Naemon had told her, though they weren't stinking, or at least she didn't smell anything. They were thin, but not in the way she and Naemon were, but they looked hungry. Instantly, pity moved her, as she remembered Mother's words.

She saw other people as well, visibly richer, with fine clothes, men to guard them, sometimes even knights by her sides. Half of the nobles of the kingdom had come for today, at least. Maybe even all of them. For a moment, it was surprising for Gwendis that her father ruled over so many people. Or that so many people could be in one place at all. With joy, she stared at the myriad of faces, the different clothes, the ways these men stood and looked around.

One man was there whom she recognized. Through the gap, the new Maester hurried to get to his queen's side. It was odd that Gwendis considered Maester Mortin to be the new Maester, given that he served her family for half of her life now, but she still had distant memories to the elderly man who had been the Maester before, until he had died. He had been nice, just like Maester Mortin. And he hadn't liked the hooded men her father was always speaking to, just like Mother.

"Silence for Queen Valaena of House Blackmont!", Maester Mortin yelled, his voice echoing through the hall. "And her daughter, Princess Gwendis" He smiled as he spoke and Gwendis smiled back at him. In awe, she noticed how the men in the hall indeed grew silent, almost at once. This sudden silence was almost as stunning as the cacophony of their voices.

"My queen, I am glad you came", Mortin said as he walked next to Mother, with Gwendis shortly behind them. "May I ask, where is King Benedict?" Valaena sighed. "The king has to attend important business", she said briefly. Mortin gave her a nod. "But I see the young princess is giving us company instead", he said. "Are you ready to learn, Gwendis?"

He said this in a voice that made even this exciting occurrence sound mundane and almost boring. Gwendis faked a playful yawn. "Learn?", she moaned and Mortin sighed. Mother however smiled. "She got this from her father", she assured the Maester and he smirked thinly. "You have a brilliant daughter", he said. "It is about time she learns some of the truly important things in life"

This however gained Gwendis' attention and she looked up. Mortin smiled as he saw her sudden interest. "Ah, there she is", he stated. "A queen in the making. There is ambition in your eyes, my princess, a rare and good trait for a woman to have"

"Don't give her ideas", Mother said. "Seven know she already has too much a head of her own" She had reached the end of the crowd now, with Mortin and Gwendis behind her and Ser Kegan even farther behind.

Silently and with a dignity that left Gwendis in awe, Mother climbed the stairs to the throne and she sat down on it, so naturally, as if she had never done anything else. She was born to rule and Gwendis could only hope to be half the queen she was, one day.

As she had learned, she sat down on the smaller chair to her mother's left, while Maester Mortin sat down to her right. Ser Kegan remained standing at the lower end of the stairs, silently watching the crowd. Mother gave Mortin a look and the old maester cleared his throat. "The queen wishes to speak to Lord Tomard Blackadder!", he proclaimed.

The young princess stared at this scenery in awe, a sort of astonishment and wonder that went beyond anything she had felt before. She had found her calling. And from the very moment her mother began to rule over her court, wise, kind, powerful and respected, Gwendis Blackmont knew that this was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

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Elise - True Mother

It had been several days since Elise and her retinue of Efran's men had left Lemonwood, and now finally they were nearing their objective.

"Lady Elise, are we getting close?" Jabar inquired with his deep voice. Elise chuckled subtly for the Summer Islander's words. "Lady Elise... it's still hard to grasp that I am now the Lady of Lemonwood," she said with a sigh. "It'll take some time for me to get used to this new title. Anyway, yes, we are getting very close to the village."

Zhobho turned his gaze to Elise now, and spoke up. "Perhaps we should rest and put up camp for the day," he suggested calmly, and Elise gave him a questioning look. "It would be better if we go to the house at night, my lady," Zhobho explained, and Elise nodded. "You are probably right," she agreed begrudgingly, and they then set up camp for the afternoon and prepared for what was to happen that night.

While Elise was eating dinner, Commander Markas sat next to her. The others mostly ate in their tents or by the fire outside, so Elise hadn't expected company. However, she and Commander Markas had known each other for a while and became good friends, so she welcomed him next to her.

"How are you feeling, knowing that after all this time, you are so close to having him back?" Markas asked with a subdued smile on his face. Elise pondered for a moment before

answering. "I am both excited and anxious," she spoke quietly, "but more than anything I am just determined, to get this over with."

"I can only imagine," Markas replied with an empathetic voice. "I imagine I'd be the same in your situation. How old would he be now anyways?"

Elise gulped subtly at Markas' question, a sting of guilt and regret going through her. "My son Athen is eight years old now," she responded quietly, which made Markas raise his eyebrows.

"Eight, huh?" He spoke with a surprised tone. "That means you had to be on your early twenties when you had him," he proclaimed with astonished expression on his face. Markas looked at her carefully, clearly thinking about something. "What is it?" Elise asked, a touch of impatience in her words.

"I was just thinking... If you don't mind me asking, who was the boy's father?" Markas asked with a polite tone. Elise looked at him for a moment, sighed, and finally spoke up. "There is a reason I don't like to talk about my past. It is not pretty." They were both quiet for a moment, until Elise decided to ask Markas something. "Did you ever notice that I was a bit.. nervous around Bjorn Harlaw and his raiders?"

Markas nodded quietly in response, and Elise then continued. "There is a reason for that," she stated coldly, bitter and painful memories surfacing in her head. "My son's father was an Ironborn Lord, and I was his salt wife," she clarified, and an expression that was a mixture of pity and realization formed on Markas' face. Perhaps he had heard enough to understand, but Elise decided to continue anyway, just to get it out of her chest. "My son's father was a cruel man named Halrik Sharp, the Lord of House Sharp," there wasn't an ounce of warmth in her voice as she spoke. "He and his crew murdered my brother, my parents, my whole family in the Reach." Elise's voice began to shake, and she could feel tears coming to her eyes. Nonetheless, she continued. "I was forced to perform the duties of a salt wife, and thus my son was born. Despite the pain I had to go through, I still loved my son very much. I was forced to endure the abuses of Halrik and his rock wife for over a year."

Now Markas spoke up, interrupting Elise. "I'm so sorry this happened to you," he said with genuine tone, and Elise subtly wiped her tears away.

"Thank you, but don't worry about it too much," she responded calmly. "I got my revenge on him. One day Halrik's crew was off the coast of the Dornish village we are near now; they were preparing to sack it. Halrik was forcing himself on me as usual, when he suddenly

insinuated that he could kill me and our son and replace me whenever he wanted,” Elise clenched her fists as she spoke, and her voice turned slightly more angered. “I could not take it anymore. There was a lantern nearby us. I took it and smashed it into his face. I then stole his dagger and jabbed it in his neck, while he was in pain. After I had killed him, I realized that the lantern had caught the ship on fire. I quickly took my baby, jumped off the ship, and swam to shore with him in my arms. The rest of the ironborn crew went down with their ship.”

“Wow, that is quite a story, Elise!” Markas proclaimed in awe. “I know,” Elise proudly stated, allowing a tiny smirk to form on her face. “However, I soon realized that I could not take care of my baby alone, living on the streets. After a few days of trying, I regretfully left him at the doorstep of a nice couple I had been observing. I watched them from afar for a while, to make sure they took care of him. After I was satisfied, I left and travelled around Dorne, on my own. I learned how to survive, on the streets, on the desert - wherever I had to. And as you know, I eventually heard of Efran’s cause and joined him.” Markas nodded to her words, a wide grin on his face now. “You’re probably glad that you did”, he said casually, and Elise nodded.

“Not only was he successful, but I’m now his wife, Lady Elise Dalt,” she said, still hardly believing her own words. “Now that I have risen to this position, it is time for my son to come live with me and Efran. He deserves to live in luxury, with his true mother.”

“I can’t argue with you there”, Markas proclaimed.

Later that night, Elise and her men packed up camp. “Tonight, our mission comes to an end! Tonight, we retrieve my son!” Elise declared with determination in her words, raising her lantern up high to illuminate everyone. Everyone cheered for her words. Of course Elise knew those cheers were not just for her, but because they were all eager to return to Lemonwood.

They traveled a relative short distance, and made it into the village without much attention, due to the late hour. Elise pointed to a little plain run down wooden house. “That is the one,” she said sternly. “The house where I had to leave my baby.”

As soon as she was sure everyone knew which house was their objective, Elise spoke up again. “I’ll approach the house and see if I can get my son without having to resort to bloodshed. If I can’t, on my signal, you will storm the house and give him to me.” She spoke in a hushed tone, and the men nodded in agreement.

Elise approached the door quietly, and knocked while the men stayed out of sight. A tired looking middle-aged woman opened the door. "Who are you? What do you want?" She asked in a lethargic voice, and Elise quickly gave her an answer. "I am Lady Elise Dalt, and I've come here to retrieve my son."

The woman looked confused, being in a loss of words for a few seconds. "What are you talking about?" She finally asked, and Elise let out a frustrated sigh.

"I am the mother of the baby boy that was left on your doorstep eight years ago," she explained calmly. "At the time, circumstances would not have allowed me to take care of him. However, now things have changed and I can take care of him. Not just that, I can give him a better life than you and your husband are now giving him. I'm sure you did your best raising him and I truly appreciate that, but now it is time he lives with me, his true mother."

The woman's face changed from confusion to anger. "Even if you are who you say you are, you have no rights to our son Evin!" She yelled strictly. "You gave up any rights to be his mother when you left him at our doorstep, for us to take care of him, to feed him and love him."

Elise shook her head in frustration. "My son's name is Athen, not Evin," she clarified sternly, "And I as his mother will have him back! I have come too far to let you and your husband stand in my way!"

The woman just stared at her, crossing her arms and blocking her way to the house. "Leave," she said with a bold and harsh tone. "Leave this property and never return, or I'll have my husband chase you away." Elise just stared at the woman for a moment that felt painfully long, weighing her options. Regretfully, she finally raised up her hand and gave the signal. The men came out of hiding and charged towards the house.

"Denzin!" The woman screamed, terrified look on her eyes. "Get Evin, we have to go!"

However, Elise was blocking the exit, trapping the woman and her husband inside. The men made it inside and pushed the woman aside, Jabar and Zhobho going in first. They spotted the husband of the woman holding his arm around the boy, shakily pointing a knife at them. The boy looked very confused and scared, as Efran's men surrounded the old man. Jabar knocked the knife out of the man's hand, after the man had sliced his arm. With a swift move Jabar opened the man's throat, and he fell down dead.

The woman screamed a terrifying scream. The boy began to weep- “Papa! Papa!” he cried, shaking the body of the dead man. The woman got up and attempted to get to her son but Elise blocked her path again. The woman attempted to punch her, but Elise dodged it, and now Efran’s men grabbed her and pushed her against the wall. As the woman struggled to get free, Elise pulled her sword out of the scabbard. She walked to the woman, and looked her to the eyes.

Without a word, Elise plunged her sword through the woman. As she died, her blood spilt on Elise’s hands. The young boy witnessing it all cried now even louder.

“Mama! No, mama!” He screamed desperately. Markas grabbed the boy from his arm, and though he struggled to free himself, Markas managed to bring him to Elise.

“Don’t worry Athen,” she whispered with a soothing tone. “You are going to live a better life, a happier life, with your true mother.”

After this, Zhobho asked what they should do about the house. “Burn it,” Elise answered coldly. Zhobho followed her order, throwing his lantern down. Elise, Athen, and Efran’s men made it out of the village without harm, and began their trek back to Lemonwood.

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Gauron Aerarys – Adventurer’s Origin

Gauron Aerarys didn’t find the heat of Dorne too problematic. It was drier than the lands of the Long Summer, but the heat itself was nothing compared to the jungles of Sothoryos. Eighteen years in the Green Hell had made Gauron more than prepared for the burning sun of Dorne.

The Aerarys family had been one of the many families of Dragonlords that rose in prominence during the Ghiscari Wars, but found themselves in hard times with the death of their last dragon. It was the dragons that made Valyria the strongest empire in the world, so a family without one was like a knight without a sword, or a khal without a horse. Gauron himself had been only 16 years old when it had happened, and before his Lord father could even decide on their next action, he fled Valyria. The young noble boy bought a cabin from a ship traveling to Volantis. It was risky, abandoning his noble family, but there were abundance of opportunities in the world for a young man with gold and wits. Gauron was prepared, or so he thought.

However, on the voyage to Volantis happened something young Gauron could've never prepared himself for. The merchant ships was attacked by pirates. They killed most of the crew, but seeing that Gauron was Valyrian, and evidently rich, they decided to capture him in hopes of good ransom. Luckily for Gauron, the pirates were incompetent enough to leave him without any guards. He soon took his opportunity and stole a rowing boat, escaping in the dead of the night.

After drifting for days, Gauron finally found himself a strange shore. Walking along the white beaches and observing the thick jungles next to them, he quickly came to a conclusion- he had stranded on Sothoryos. Even the Valyrians avoided those gods forsaken lands, rumored to hold naught but misery in its wet forests. The only reason for anyone to come here was to look for slaves, a task usually left for the slavers of Slaver's Bay.

After days of thirst and hunger Gauron fell unconscious, having abandon almost all hope for survival. However, he soon woke up in a wooden shack, surrounded by the Brindled Men, the dark skinned, tall and taciturn inhabitants of the jungles. The stories Gauron had heard painted these people as savages and cannibals that adored dark gods, but this particular tribe happened to be surprisingly accommodating.

After spending enough months, or what he measured as months with the tribe, he learned a lot about their way of living. Half the time they lived in their simple settlements, half the time they stayed on the move. The tribes were ruled by chieftains, who made their status known with elaborate face paintings and bone jewelry. The tribes usually hunted jungle boars and monkeys, as well as collected edible bugs. The fruits were carefully picked according to the season.

The settlement of the tribe Gauron lived with was located near the Zamoyos river. Water flows calmly on Zamoyos, but it is inhabited by gigantic crocodiles big enough to drag a horse with ease, and schools of fishes capable of skinning a man in minutes. Gauron found these fish surprisingly tasty when caught separately. The jungles themselves were also full of creatures, some of them deadly dangerous. There were insects that carried nasty diseases that even the Brindled Men aren't completely immune to, massive elephants, elegant horned deer, huge variety of monkeys, and much more.

After living what Gauron had counted as eight years around the same area, the tribe moved to another territory inland, where they encountered other tribes, ones ruthless or desperate enough to eat their slain foes.

With his closest companion, a chieftain's son who called himself Brun, Gauron one day came up with an idea. They wanted to learn more, see more. So, together with his friend Gauron decided to make an expedition southward, the chieftain giving them a couple warriors to guard them from dangers. Gauron's hunger to explore wasn't even nearly fulfilled, and now his adventures were about to truly begin.

After traveling south for nearly a month, they reached the abandoned city of Yeen, and it quickly came clear that the terrifying stories of that accursed construction were not unfounded. An eerie silence dwelled in the city, as plants, birds and even bugs stayed out of its dark streets. Even Gauron as a Valyrian felt an enormous unease, and a primal fear that prevented him from delving too deep into its massive buildings.

The Bridled men also avoided the city, and according to their stories that Gauron understood, it had been abandoned long ago during a period simply known as the Time of Nightmares. They refused to speak much of that time, fearing it would attract the horrors that swallowed the inhabitants of the black city. Gauron himself never saw any brindled ghouls or eyeless cave-dwellers, but he didn't dismiss their existence completely, since many of those stories had basis in reality.

On the forests south of Yeen Gauron and his companions had a rare encounter with a giant ape. Those giants of the jungle usually walk on all fours, but fully standing they would be twenty feet tall, far taller than the giants of the frozen north in Westeros. Luckily, the creature didn't pay mind to Gauron and his friends, and kept wandering the jungle in search for food.

Eventually they reached what was arguably the most dangerous part of their journey - the true Green Hell. Many call Valyria a land of magic, but the Green Hell is a land of giants. Among its inhabitants are fifty feet long snakes, spotted spiders, giant pale bats that could carry a child, and packs of bipedal, tattooed lizards with sharp claws that could tear the throat of a man. And then there were its supreme predators; wyverns. While in many ways similar to dragons, wyverns don't breath fire. They also couldn't be tamed by a man, Gauron was sure of that. Brindled wyverns, swamp wyverns, and brown-bellies were both magnificent as well as terrifying, but the most elusive of its kin was the shadow-wing. The creature was silent like a ghost, and dark as the night, with piercing white eyes. It had been attracted to their encampment, but luckily it didn't consider any of them prey, only curiosities. Gauron only saw it once, but the experience was more than enough to last for a lifetime.

The journey back lasted more than two months, but when they returned, he felt almost like home. The years passed incredibly fast after their return, and then one day during a visit to

the abandoned city of Zamettar, Gauron spotted a merchant vessel that had anchored for provisions. This was perhaps the only chance he would get to return to the civilized world, and he took it. He only had time to say a brief goodbye to his friend Brun, but he would never forget him.

The ship took Gauron to Volantis, and there he saw that the city had grown much in the years he had been gone. That was where he met the White Elephant, before he had even took that name, and together they returned to Valyria. He discovered his parents had long passed, and his sister was married to a dragon rider of a minor noble family known as the Targaryens. There was no reason for him to stay, so he continued his travels with White Elephant. The journey eastwards was long, but not as tiring as all his years in the south. At the city of Yin, they met Jinora, a tall woman warrior from the mysterious Island of Leng. She was an odd sight even in Yi Ti, the neighboring realm of Leng. With his new friends Gauron took on the life of a sellsword, and the journey westwards only made him more excited to see the rest of the Known World.

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Book 2

Alester Upton - Accepting the Call

With tired eyes, Lord Alester Upton sat at the head of the table as the small council meeting unfolded. He wasn't focused on the meeting however, but rather his mind traveled back to days long gone. Alester had now been the Lord of Sword's Edge for nearly two and half years, but the sheer boredom that came from these meetings never subsided. All kinds of things crossed his mind as he sat at the head of this table, but today he remembered his past adventures with Jamison Dayne, back from the days when they traveled Westeros together. They had fought in tourneys and slept in taverns, living like hedge knights with not a care in the world.

Looking back to those great times now, it was as if it had been just the day before. He remembered when they tried to bring peace between the Oakhearts and Daynes by bedding

the two Oakheart sisters at the tourney of Highgarden. Unfortunately, their brothers weren't pleased, to say the least, so Alester and Jamison ended up giving them black eyes and broken noses to take back to Old Oak. He also thought about that time they had killed a group of bandits who had the gall to try and rob them on some old road near Gallowsgrey. "The gods may forgive, but I don't", Alester remembered saying as he beheaded the last thug out of that group, and the look on that outlaw's face still brought a smirk to his face.

Alester had so many great memories from that year he spent traveling with Jamison around the Reach and the Stormlands. However, the death of his father and older brother had brought him back to Dorne, where his life would be changed forever as he had to take on his Lord father's title as Lord of Sword's Edge. Those times seemed now so recent yet so far away. A lot had changed since then, with Alester and Jamison both now being lords, fathers and married men in their own right. Those days when their only worry had been which one out of the two could drink the most ale or bed the most attractive lady that night was only a pleasant memory now, more distant every day.

Alester's mind also wandered to the last battle he had been involved in. He had led a couple hundred of his finest soldiers up the Torrentine to the Kingdom of Blackmont, where they had restored order for the Vulture Knight and his father. The men of House Upton had took down Karsan Taller's rebellion before it could even get started. Admittedly, Alester wasn't much of an historian, but he could imagine the satisfaction of victory he had felt was once shared by Lord Ulwyck Upton as he led King Samwell's vanguard in the sacking of Oldtown. In his mind, Alester could see Oldtown burning and the Hightower men retreating in defeat as the men of the Torrentine took what was theirs. Alester imagined it had felt similar to when he lead his men down that hill to defeat those rebels. It was a feeling he knew could only be replicated in battle, and he wanted to feel it again.

Of course, Alester didn't mind the Kingdom being at peace. It meant his family was safe, his mother, his wife and his daughter. It also meant his people were safe and the kingdom prospered in what was said to be the most prosperous era of the last century for the Kingdom of Torrentine. At the same time however, Alester missed the thrill of battle, the clashing of steel and the smell of fresh blood. It was those moments of chaos that determined how strong a man truly was. Throughout history, House Upton had proven themselves time and again in battle with them oftentimes being the first to lead their men to battle against House Dayne's enemies. While Alester had killed and defeated many men in

his life, he hadn't yet had that war that would define him and his reign as Lord.

Shaking those thoughts out of his mind for now, Alester tried to focus on the meeting around him again. He looked over at his mother, Lady Alerah, and cleared his throat. "So, mother. Why are we holding this meeting again? Didn't we just hold one last week?" He asked with a disinterested tone, to which his mother rolled her eyes.

"Yes my son, we hold council meetings every week," Alerah reminded with a patient tone. "You would know that by now if you actually showed any interest towards ruling your lands. You need to be here and learn all you can about governing your own lands, because your uncle and I won't always be around to take care of these things for you."

The annoyance in his mother's voice made Alester crack a smirk. "Well mother, you should know by now I just don't care about how we are going to ration our crops or any of these other pointless debates", he spoke nonchalantly, leaning back on his chair with his hands behind his head. "The only reason I'm here is because I'm tired of you harassing me about it. Besides, you and uncle are still in your primes, look at you two. Hells, I know I'd be afraid to meet Uncle Stanler in battle." With a brash laughter Alester ran his hands forcefully over the top of his uncle's bald head. Stanler reacted by immediately moving his head away in annoyance. "You need to listen to your mother, my lord", he grumbled. "We won't be around forever, and you won't be prepared if you just spend all of your time drinking and preparing men for a war that hopefully never comes." Alester had heard this speech time and time again and really had no urge to listen to it once more.

"Please uncle, I have no desire to hear this lecture again, you know as well as I that House Upton has always thrived in times of war. We are known for our prowess in battle, not for being cooped up in our keep and reading books." Alester spoke with a condescending tone that made his uncle grunt in annoyance. "But I suppose I'm here already, so I might as well take part", Alester continued with a small sigh. "What all do we have to go over this week, mother?" he asked, an arrogant smirk forming on his face.

"Well my son, you're in luck", Alerah responded sharply. "There isn't much news to go over this week, but what we do have to discuss might be of great interest to you, and that is the threat of Princess Nymeria". Lady Alerah spoke with clear worry showing in her voice. "As you know, she has laid claim to the entirety of Dorne, with over half of Dorne already being

under the rule of her Principality. The last two years she has remained passive, but it is only a question of time before she brings her fight to our kingdom. So, we need to be prepared for what's to come. I know you've been training our troops vigorously, but there is more to war than that. We may have to house fleeing smallfolk within our walls, we must have sufficient supply reserves in case of a siege, and so on."

"I agree with Lady Alerah", Stanler chimed in with his usual dry and humorless tone.

"Nymeria conquered the entire eastern coast along with the Kingdom of Brimstone in a relatively short period of time, so we know she is a capable military commander. The Rhoynar princess and her allies are a great threat to this kingdom, and we ought to be prepared not only to aid our king to fight against her armies, but also to protect our people from them."

Alester had heard plenty about this Princess Nymeria and how dangerous she was supposed to be, but even still he was not impressed and the smirk on his face clearly showed it. "You two worry way too much", he said with a relaxed tone. "Honestly, what exactly has the Rhoynar princess done that would warrant such fear and concern? She conquered a few petty houses who claimed to be independent, and as far as the Kingdom of Brimstone goes, King Lucifer defeated himself, Nymeria merely reaped the benefits. This Principality as they call it, hasn't faced a real army yet, and I am sure they know that. The men of the Torrentine have no equal, and if this Princess Nymeria really is stupid enough to try and test our kingdom, then she and all of her followers will get exactly what's coming to them." The confidence Alester was displaying didn't seem to convince his mother or uncle, so he tried to reassure them even more. "As far as House Upton goes, we are prepared for war whenever that time comes, our men are well trained and they are chomping at the bit for some action."

A moment of silence followed Alester's confident words, after which Ser Orwen Wythmail walked into the meeting room with what looked to be a letter in his hand. "My Lord, Lady Alerah and Lord Stanler, forgive me for interrupting, but I just received some urgent news from Maester Gregory that had to be brought to you at once." The dark-haired knight spoke with a nervous tone that was very unusual for him, so Alester knew there had to be something wrong. "Well spit it out Ser Orwen, no need in keeping us waiting", he urged the knight. Ser Orwen took a deep breath and handed over the message to Alester to read for himself. And so he did.

Lord Alester,

We have just received word from Prince Garret that Clearhaven has fallen in hands of forces representing the Principality of Dorne. This clear act of aggression on the part of House Martell has signified that any chance for a diplomatic solution with Princess Nymeria has been severed. Their actions demand a response by means of force. Because of this, King Vorian is calling upon you to gather up all of the men that you can muster within a week of receiving this message. Then from there, you shall bring all these men to Starfall immediately.

Respectfully yours,

Maester Norbert

Alester read the message from Maester Norbert, and then reread it again. The fact that Nymeria actually had the nerve to attack Clearhaven, the town of his best friend, infuriated Alester to no end. To think what could have happened if Jamison or his family would have been there at that time, it made Alester's blood boil.

Anger taking over him, Alester read the message once more, after which he slammed his fist on the table with great fury, squashing the piece of parchment in his closed fist. "What is it?" Alerah asked with great confusion.

"It's... Nymeria", Alester responded quietly, taking in a deep breath before continuing. "She has taken Clearhaven, and now King Vorian is raising an army to take it back. I'm sorry mother, but this meeting is over", Alester said with calm anger in his voice as he stood up. Without waiting for a response from his mother, Alester walked out of the room with Ser Orwen following behind him. In silence they walked out of the main keep and out into the courtyard of Sword's Edge.

"Ser Orwen, round up all of your guards and all of our knights", Alester spoke up with a confident tone. "You will take half of the guards and go north. From there, you'll round up every able-bodied man, young or old, and bring them back here. I will take the other half and go south where I'll do the same. Don't come back to Sword's Edge until every man is

rounded up. If they live off of our lands, they can fight for our kingdom do you understand me?"

"Yes, mylord. I will gather the men at once", Ser Orwen said sternly as he hurried away.

In just a few short minutes, the courtyard of Sword's Edge contained every guard and knight of the household, and Alester decided to give a speech to rile up his men. "Brothers, Nymeria has made her move, and war is upon us", he started with words that were sure to grab the attention of every man present. He let his eyes wander over the soldiers for a moment, making sure they had all understood the severity of what he just said. "The Rhoynar bitch thinks our king will bend his knee to her, and that the Kingdom of Torrentine will be no more, but she's wrong! Nymeria has made the biggest mistake of her life in provoking House Dayne, and House Upton stands strongly beside them as we have throughout history. She thinks we fear her, brothers, but she clearly doesn't know us. We fear no foe, and soon enough Nymeria will wish that it was still the dragonfire she was facing, and not the righteous fury of the men of Torrentine!" Alester roared these last words and the Upton knights raised their swords in applause.

With those final words, Alester walked down from the podium and mounted his horse. Half of House Upton's household guard behind him, he began his ride south to gather up troops for the coming war. As he rode out of the gates, Alester realized just how quickly things had changed, how quickly he felt so much more alive again. Like Lord Ulwyck had helped King Samwell sack Oldtown thousands of years ago, and Lord Willam Upton had conquered nearly half of Dorne beside King Sedric Dayne just a couple centuries ago, Alester now had his goal, he had his purpose. War had finally reached his kingdom and it was his duty not to just take part, but to make sure he did everything he possibly could to help King Vorian rid the world of Princess Nymeria, and finish what the dragonlords had started.

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Verro & Nesila – Scars

Several weeks had passed since Verro, Nesila, and Zaltha had left Vaith, embarking on the journey through the desert to reach the Wide Way, and eventually Nightsong. Today they had come across travelers from the north, informing them that the Red Mountains were less

than two days' travel away. However, it was getting late now, and Zaltha suggested they set up camp for the night.

"Fine", Nesila said with a sigh. The closer they got to their destination, the less she seemed to need rest, and the more eager she grew to reunite with her brother. "We'll set up camp for tonight, but we leave first thing in the morning. As far as I know there shouldn't be more than a week's travel to Nightsong. With some luck the Carons will know exactly where Norano is."

Verro sat down with a sigh, but before he could even think about laying down, he heard Nesila's voice again. "Here, catch!" she yelled, throwing Verro one of the two wooden fighting staffs she had acquired during their stay in Vaith. "What do you want me to do with this?", Verro questioned as he caught the staff.

"It's to train with", Nesila responded with a smirk. "Your leg is completely healed now. I don't need you to be getting rusty on me."

Verro grinned as he stood up and took off his shirt, revealing his various battle scars. "I was a pit fighter for five years and a pirate for four", he reminded with a relaxed tone. "I don't think you need to worry about me getting rusty."

"We'll see about that", Nesila retorted, her grin only widening. "First, we will train with these; then we'll train hand to hand," she said as she raised her fists, to which Verro raised an eyebrow. "Whatever you say, but be prepared to lose", he quipped as he raised the staff to an attack position.

They jumped towards each other, and their staffs clashed against each other three times in quick succession. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask you about those scars", Nesila said with a curious tone as they backed away from each other, both still holding the staffs high.

"Perhaps I'll tell you, but I want to know some things about you first", Verro replied sharply. "After all, I've already told you a lot about myself, while you remain a mystery." Nesila moved for another attack, and Verro blocked it and made her jump back with his counter attack.

"What do you want to know?" she asked, breathing heavily, after deflecting another one of Verro's blows. "How did you become such a good fighter?" He asked calmly. "Also, why did

you and your brother join the Thunder Crew in the first place?”

As she dodged his swing, she looked Verro in the eyes and let out a small sigh. “It’s not a very pleasant story, Verro”, she warned, to which he shrugged. “I can handle it”, he assured, and Nesila nodded, beginning to recount her story.

“Back in Myr, me and Norano were trained with spear from a young age”, she started with a tone that was both somber and longing at the same time. “We were to serve the temple of the Lady of Spears, but eventually Norano found a more lucrative employer, and convinced me to come with him. And so, we came to work under the wealthy and influential Vylohor family. Our job was to train their children and the new recruits with spear, which was simple enough.” Having said this, Nesila struck with her staff from above, and Verro only barely managed to react fast enough to block it.

“That explains your fighting ability”, he said with a confused tone on his voice. “But why would you want to leave such a secure and seemingly good life?” he asked, and Nesila rolled her eyes. “I was getting to that,” she said with a frustrated tone, striking again, harder this time. “Everything was going well until one day, when we woke up to find the entire family murdered.” The blunt way of Nesila telling this distracted Verro, allowing her to get a hit on his stomach.

“You let your guard down”, she stated monotonously. “It won’t happen again”, Verro muttered after a few moments of heavy breathing. Then he charged towards her again, and they continued sparring.

“Do you know what happened?” Verro asked after a moment, to which Nesila shrugged. “I have a theory”, she said with a grim tone. “You see, the captain of the guard was later found murdered with his face missing. So, it seems clear that someone hired a faceless man to assassinate the Vylohors. One of their political enemies, most likely. I don’t much care to be honest, but the point is that Norano and I had nowhere to go.” Nesila paused for a moment, exchanging a few swings with Verro before continuing. “That is until Malanos Vynos saw us sparring at the harbor of Myr, and noticed the potential in us. He recruited us to the Thunder Crew, and we served with them for many years.”

“Until he decided to leave?” Verro asked, breathing heavily, and Nesila could spot from his

expression and posture that he was getting tired. "It was when we first arrived to Dorne", she said calmly, striking again from right, noticing Verro's defense faltering. "I was confused and angry when he told me he wanted to leave the Thunder Crew to find a better life. After all, we owed everything we had at that point to Malanos. There are many days, I wish I had either left with him or stopped him", she spoke somberly, and then the look on her eyes go sharper. "But we are going to find him now!" she said with exasperation, knocking Verro's staff out of his hands, and proceeding to send him to the ground by knocking his legs out from under him.

With a satisfied smile she stepped next to Verro and pressed her staff against his chest. "I win", she said triumphantly. "All right, spear lady", Verro replied with a playful smirk on his face. "I admit you're better with the staff, but let's see how you do hand to hand."

As Verro scrambled up from the sand, they began their hand to hand sparring. Both of them dodged each other's punches and kicks at first with ease. "Now it is time for you to answer my questions", Nesila said determinedly. "Let's start with the scar across your chest. How did you get it?"

"Aw, this little thing?" Verro responded playfully. "I was nineteen when this happened. It was a pit fight against a giant brindled man from Sothoryos. He was very hard to kill."

"I imagine he was!" Zaltha shouted from the sidelines. "My people have had to deal with the bridled men in the past, uncultured savages the bunch of them, but fight like beasts." Verro nodded to the Summer Islander's words as he dodged one of Nesila's kicks. "I managed to dance away from his reckless and brutal slashing for a while, but eventually he got in too close and cut my chest open. Thankfully I managed to slice open his throat with my arakh before bleeding out. Spent three days laying down after that fight."

"What about the scar on your side?", Nesila asked inquisitively, and a slightly more serious expression formed on Verro's face now. "That was when I was forced to fight one of my own Dothraki brethren in the pits", he answered with a small sigh. "I was sixteen at that time. We were both given horses to ride and spears as weapons. Unfortunately, the other Dothraki was more experienced at both, and he was able to kill my horse and pierce my side."

"I wonder how you got out of that one", Nesila remarked as Verro took one of her punches

on the chest. "It was pure luck", he admitted nonchalantly. "I speared his horse and as it crumbled to its death, the rider hit his head on the ground hard enough to pass out. Wasn't exactly a challenge to kill him after that."

"Hmm..." Nesila eyed him as she threw another punch. "What about that scar on your shoulder?"

"I was twenty, it was one of my last pit fights, one with several fighters", Verro responded calmly. "One of them was a Westerosi from a place called Vale. He was using a crossbow, and managed to get me in the shoulder. Unfortunately for him, I was able to get in close, pin him to the ground, and stab him in the head with one of his own bolts. Do you want to know how I pinned him?" Verro asked cheekily, and Nesila narrowed her eyes. "How?" she asked curiously.

"Like this," Verro responded, grabbing her from the shoulders and tripping her over his leg. Verro could tell from the look in her eyes how surprised she was to find herself pinned between him and the ground. "I win", he whispered with a playful tone, his face just few inches above hers. They remained there for a couple of lingering seconds, looking each other in the eyes.

"Will you two kiss already?" Zaltha yelled from the side, an amused tone on his voice. "This romantic tension is getting suffocating."

Verro looked at Nesila, a somewhat nervous grin on his face. "What do you think of that idea?" he asked with a chuckle, and Nesila moved her right hand on Verro's neck. "Just shut up and kiss me", she responded sharply, and before Verro could say or do anything, she had already pulled him down and pushed her lips against his. For a moment they were both lost in the passionate kiss, forgetting the world around them.

Zaltha's chuckle shifted their focus to him for a moment, and with a grin on his face the Summer Islander raised up his hands. "Don't mind me", he said amusedly, turning away from them. That night, Verro and Nesila didn't sleep.

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