

Act II: Shattered and Broken

Chapter I: Butterfly

Lucas

No... that was impossible. The man was dead. Nobody could survive a fall like this. They had found his corpse, shattered and broken, fallen from the tower. Murdered. But who had found the corpse? Some servants? He had never seen it. It had to be impossible! Yet, here he was.

Maester Eaton. He was a bit paler than Lucas remembered, his face a bit thinner, gaunt, a bit harder. The eyes had the same blue colour, but instead of the warmth Lucas had always found in Eaton's eyes, these looked at him with cold indifference. But everything else was the same.

The fine wrinkles, the sharp nose...

"Maester Eaton...", Lucas repeated, still in complete shock. "This is impossible", Leonard exclaimed, only marginally more composed. Maester Eaton looked at them, still showing no signs of any joy. "Do I know you?", he finally asked. It was his voice, but any trace of kindness was gone, as well as most signs of the physical weakness Eaton suffered from. Instead this voice sounded sharp, determined and would have been befitting to a man a good twenty years younger. But still, that was his voice. His eyes showed no sign of recognition, but he was carefully eyeing the sigil on their tabards.

"Two knights from Raylansfair. From what Dairon here told me, you are... Lucas Flowers and Leonard Constantine, I presume", he said slowly. Lucas regained his composure a bit earlier than Leonard and took a step towards the man, still unsure what to say or how to act. "How... no... who are you? You can't be Maester Eaton!", he stuttered and the Maester raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You keep using that name, boy. You'd be well advised to show some respect for the dead", he hissed. "No, I am not Eaton and I have never pretended to be. My name is Quent, but you will call me Archmaester"

Lucas looked at Leonard, who finally managed to close his mouth. "But...", the other knight stuttered. "You are... you..." He paused and looked at Lucas, visibly shaken. The Maester looked at them, shaking his head. "Your confusion is understandable. After all, me and my brother look quite similar", he said. The revelation hit Lucas like a horse kick. "Brother!", he exclaimed. "You are Eaton's brother!"

Quent gave him a sharp glare. "Younger brother by two years. But in my age, two years hardly matter" He finally pointed at the chairs. "Sit down", he ordered and Lucas was only too happy to oblige. His knees were shaking and he was still looking at the man in pure shock. He looked like Eaton. But he was different. Small mannerisms that were characteristic for Eaton. The underlying sadness in his eyes. Quent was different. There was no sadness in his eyes. There was only bitterness, a glare sharp enough to cut rocks. Eaton had this glare too, but it always

seemed to be benevolent with him, keen and friendly. Quent on the other hand looked leery, resentful.

“Two knights, serving a dead house and my dead brother, chasing a barely-grown halfwit across the Reach”, Quent said and his frown formed into a cold smirk. “And now you are here and call me *'Eaton'*” As he spoke the dead man's name, his voice hardened. “I assume you have many questions”

Leonard leant forwards, looking the Archmaester directly in the eyes. He had regained his composure completely, although Lucas noticed the same shock in his stare that he felt himself.

“You are Eaton's brother... why had he never mentioned you?”, Leonard asked.

Quent shrugged, a surprisingly agile movement for a man of his age. “We weren't close. I have rarely spoken about him, I guess he never spoke of me. That's the positive thing about the order of Maesters. We have no last name and no family”, he explained. “Besides, what would he say about me? I can say nothing good about him and I doubt it would be any nicer the other way around”

Lucas watched Leonard leaning backwards again, still breathing heavily. Eaton's brother! The Archmaester was Maester Eaton's brother. He opened his mouth, but before he could say something Leonard looked at Dairon. “And you?”, he hissed. “You knew anything about this?” His voice sounded probably sharper than he intended and Dairon slightly shivered. “N... No, Ser Leonard! Eaton only told me to go to Archmaester Quent, to give him...”, he said but paused and looked at the Archmaester. Quent had looked at Lucas while Dairon was speaking and let out an audible sigh now. “It's alright, boy. These knights already know about Lord Raylans last will”

As he noticed Lucas surprised glare, his smirk got colder. “What? You are easy to read, boy. Not a liar. Your companion is a bit harder...”, he said and looked at Leonard. “Are you a liar, boy?”

Lucas noticed Leonard's facial expression turning into an angry frown, but the knight stayed silent, clenching his fists. Quent shook his head. “Remarkable self-restraint”, he said with a mocking tone, before reaching into a pocket inside of his robe, pulling out a small envelope.

Lucas noticed the broken seal of House Raylan on it. “Anyways, here is your last will”, he said, slightly waving it, before putting it right in front of him, his smirk turning into a devious smile.

“You know, as a Historian who can't write history, things get quite boring sometimes...”, he started, looking from Lucas to Leonard. “And this...” He grabbed the last will, holding it in his pale hands, riddled with age-marks. “This is a wonderful coincidence, don't you agree?”

Leonard was about to say something, but this time Lucas cut him off. “So, you are telling us that you're going to give the will to Lord Hightower? To get your archive?”, he asked. Something wasn't right here. The way Quent looked at them... Lucas was not a skilled liar, he was nowhere

like his brother. But he knew how manipulating someone looked like. "I don't think you're doing this...", he added.

This time Quent looked surprised. "And why shouldn't I? Every Historian before me hoped for a chance like this" He waved the last will again. "Tell me, why shouldn't I do this? A single word to Lord Hightower and he will bring your archive to it's knees. He will bring it home, where it belongs. Tell me, why shouldn't I? I'm curious what you're offering"

Offering? Seven Hells, what could he offer? He had little money and all the riches of Raylansfair wouldn't be enough to satisfy a man like Quent. There was nothing he could offer. Lucas looked at Dairon. Eaton's apprentice was only two years younger than him, but looked a good five years younger, more a boy than a man. And he looked guilty, avoiding his stare, instead looking at the table. And in that moment, Lucas realized something. "Maester Eaton knew that Hightower wouldn't be good for Raylansfair, right?", Lucas said, looking triumphantly at Quent. The Archmaester gave him a nod. "Correct, boy", he answered.

"Maester Eaton was a wise man", Lucas continued and Quent shook his head. "Debatable. But when it came down to his city, yes, even I admit that I know men more foolish than him", the Archmaester answered and Lucas gave him a triumphant smile. "And still he gave Dairon the last will with specific instructions to contact you, knowing fully well about the grudge between you...", he started but was cut off by Quent slamming his fist on the table. The sudden, loud sound was enough to silence him.

"Grudge?", Quent growled, his voice. "We came from very humble beginnings. Not quite peasants, but poor smallfolk, a small merchants sons. I always strived for greatness. I always wanted to write history. While Eaton was outside, tormenting some old man, I learned. I learned how to write. I learned how to read. I studied, even before I came here. And I was better than Eaton. Still, everything I had to work so hard for was nothing compared to the easiness Eaton acquired new skills" The Archmaester paused for a moment as his cold glare faded, replaced by something much deeper. "He never worked, yet still I had to struggle to be better than him. If only he would have had my ambition... the greatest mind I've ever known, wasted to a foolish boy" For a moment the Archmaester seemed genuinely sad. "Of course, he had to start studying too. It had always been my dream, but he followed me out of spite. And while I worked hard, forged my links, he was outside, drinking, getting into fights. Naturally, the Citadel chose him to be Raylansfair's Maester, a troublemaker, having only his necessary links"

The sad look on Quent's face was replaced by cruel smirk. "He was especially bad in healing, having to bribe the Archmaester to be able to forge his link. Guess that killed Lord Raylan's younger sister when she was crushed by that horse. I know I could have saved her" The cruel smirk vanished, replaced by a stern, angry glare. "I became Archmaester of history. Yet he, a simple Maester, had everything I ever wanted. And he did not deserve it. He didn't even want it.

And yet...", Quent hissed, before pausing and looking Lucas straight in the eye, furious enough to make the knight flinch. "He was my brother. Don't you ever dare calling this a grudge again!" Leonard cleared his throat. "Does that mean you are helping us?", he asked. Quent gave him a short nod. "Exactly. Me and my brother... we haven't talked for years. I am not too saddened by his untimely death. A Maester has no family. Yet, he is my blood. And I won't turn him down" Archmaester Quent looked at Lucas again. "Hightower won't be good for Raylansfair. Only the Seven know what madness afflicted Lord Raylan when he chose him as his successor. And then there is this...", he explained, pulling out a small document out of his robe. "A second note, accompanying the will. Written by Eaton. Most of these words are... personal... but I could tell that my brother was afraid. Probably for the first time in his life, not counting the time where he let Morna Raylan die. And he was uncertain. Uncertain what to do. Torn between loyalty for his city and loyalty between his old friend"

The old man shook his bald head. "Normally I would marvel over this. My brother, uncertain what to do. It would will me with glee. But after what he had written here... It might seem like it, but I never truly hated my brother. I hate what I'm going to do, but I won't let him down. He wanted me to choose, but not the choice I would make, but the choice that is the right one here" He stared at the last will. "And I am afraid I am not able to make the right choice. I am too biased. An old man who spent a lifetime in bitterness. That's why I hoped for people like you. Dairon told me about you. Lucas Flowers, the bastard of Darkdell. Banished from your lands... Tell me, how was it when you tried to murder your father?"

Lucas felt anger growing inside of him and for one moment he had to suppress the urge to jump at the Archmaester. "I have never tried to murder him!", he shouted. "I tried to save him from my brother!"

Quent shrugged. "Of course you have. And I won't doubt your version of this story, not as long as you are the one with the sword", he said and looked at Leonard. "And Leonard Constantine. Finding something about you was a bit harder. Tell me, when your whore tied you to a boat and tried to burn you alive, what were your feelings? Did you feel betrayed? Angry? Are you a man who seeks vengeance?" His voice was like poison and Lucas saw how Leonard's face dropped. "How do you know about that?", the knight growled. "How the fuck do you know about that!" He raised from his chair, but Lucas was quicker, grabbing Leonard by the arm. "Len...", he hissed sharply and the other knight gave him a glare of helpless anger. Quent answered with a cold smirk.

"As I thought. An angry man", he said gleefully. "The Citadel has it's ways to find out about people. I knew, the castellan would send knights after Dairon. And Raylansfair only has four knights. The castellan won't go himself, not while he has to build up his own position. This 'Impaler', he won't go either. He is too important to go on such a petty mission. But Lucas

Flowers, the bastard and Leonard Constantine, the messenger... I did some research on you. I have expected you, just not yet. Maybe tomorrow. You were faster than I thought"

He looked at Leonard and his face got a bit softer, almost resembling Eaton's for a moment. "I am sorry, Ser Leonard. I never meant any disrespect", he said. Leonard gave him a cold glare. "Have I mentioned that I hate liars?", he growled as an answer. Quent's polite expression vanished, replaced by the usual cold look. "Understandable, after what happened", he simply stated. Lucas saw Leonard clenching his fists, but staying silent.

"From what I see, you are better suited to decide, better than me for sure", Quent explained.

"That's why I am giving this responsibility to you. However, there are a few things you need to talk to with Dairon. Some very interesting things. I have uncovered some extraordinary secrets too and I am willing to share them with...", he explained but was cut off by the sound of someone banging on his door. Before he could answer, the door was opened and the old man who sat in the antechamber stepped in. "Archmaester!", he exclaimed. "I hear men coming. Several, actually. And from the sound they make, they have to be armed"

Leonard gave Lucas an alarmed stare and both of them raised and put hands on their swords.

Quent raised too, but he gave them a stern look. "No violence", he hissed. "I can guess who that might be. Mullendore and his butchers. Was only a matter of time until they find the boy. Only thing that surprises me is that Mullendore is faster than Butterfly and the Burned Man"

He looked at Dairon. "You need to go, boy. Hide under the bed while we talk to Mullendore", he warned him and Lucas gave him an alarmed stare. "You're sending him away? Why?", he demanded to know. Archmaester Quent didn't even look at him, instead he was pulling Dairon up, pushing him towards his bed. "Because Maron Mullendore is not the kind of man you want to have this boy talking to. He is only marginally better than the Burned Man. Don't you worry, I won't send him away. I will only send him to an old friend, someone who will never be searched by anyone, not by Butterfly, not by the Burned Man, not by Hightower and his hounds"

He paused a moment and smiled cheerfully. "I'm sending him to the Mage. Wulvren might be the only one here whom I would trust in any way. Half of the Archmaesters are paid, either by Butterfly or by the Burned Man. Butterfly has the Smith and the Healer on his payroll. The Burned Man pays the Stargazer and the Tactician. And those are only the ones I know about. I suspect that the Seneschal might be on someone's payroll, but I have no proof. The only one who isn't interested in any bribery and who isn't of interest for anyone is Wulvren the Mage. It's a shame that Valyrian Steel gets wasted on someone like him"

Quent interrupted himself, pushing Dairon under his large bed. "And stay there! Say no word", he hissed. Leonard leant forwards to Lucas, whispering in his ear. "Do you trust him?", he asked. Lucas shook his head. "Not a single bit", he answered. Leonard seemed to be pleased by this answer. "You're no fool, Flowers. But he is right with one thing. This Mullendore mustn't

know about Dairon or the will. He is Hightowers creature. Give him anything and he will decide for us, but he will decide in favour of Hightower”

Quent looked up to Lucas. “Whatever Mullendore says, don't believe him! He is not your ally, I am. Don't tell him anything about Dairon!”, he urged, sitting down again.

Heavy boots could be heard in front of the door and Lucas looked up as the door was opened. He had expected to be disturbed after their little show in the antechamber. But he hadn't counted on that many guards entering the room. Their leader was a tall man, probably around fifty years, maybe older. His hair was fiery red, but started to grey and he was a bit on the heavy side. Six black and orange butterflies were visible on his tabard... House Mullendore of Uplands. “Good evening Maester, Sers. I hope I don't disturb anything important”, the knight said politely while taking a stilted bow. “My name is Ser Maron Mullendore. I have a few questions for these two knights” His voice sounded hoarse, but polite. The look in his dark blue eyes was harsh, but Lucas appreciated the honesty he saw in them.

Quent offered him a chair with a polite gesture and Mullendore sat down, folding his arms, while looking at Lucas, Leonard and Quent, his mouth forming a casual smile. “I assume you have heard about me?”, he asked and Lucas gave him a nod. He remembered what the guardsman at the gate told him. Mullendore was a man he wouldn't want to have around Lunett...

“Yes, Ser Maron. I have heard that you are tasked with bringing down these crimelords”, he said and Mullendore's casual smile vanished. “Right. The cripple and that fucking Butterfly”, he said. “I should be thankful for Butterfly. After all he already defeated most of this cities criminals, at least the ones who don't work for the cripple. But I have lost men too, good men, honest men. The kind of man who won't take bribes...” His stare suddenly hardened. “You wouldn't take any bribes, right?”, he asked. Leonard frowned as he heard this, vigorously shaking his head. “With all due respect, Ser Maron, but we are knights”, he answered.

For a moment Mullendore looked baffled. Then his smile returned. “Ah, right, I forgot. Knights from the countryside. Sers, you do my job for twenty years, you'll see that most men around me are corrupt to the core. But I believe you. You have this look of honest men...” He let out a sigh, looking at the Archmaester. “But look at me, babbling like a fool when I have questions for you” His polite smile returned.

“You see, currently I'm targeting the Burned Man, but I am also working against Butterfly. I dream of a city in which both of them have no place anymore. A city in which the law has a meaning again. And all will be well...”, he said and paused for a moment.

“I have... well... you might say I have interrogated one of Butterflies men. Asked him about his plans. He knew one thing, you know... he was looking for a young boy, a Maester's apprentice, coming from Raylansfair. The boy's name was Dairon. Naturally my men searched the city, with little success. A common boy can remain hidden in a city as large as Oldtown. I am not the

Burned Man with his network of spies and people aren't as afraid of me as they are of Butterfly, so I can't even intimidate them as well as I should be able to do... But then I received word that two knights from Raylansfair entered the city and I knew we have a common goal, namely finding the boy and protecting him against Butterfly. You want to bring him back to Raylansfair, I want to use his knowledge against Butterfly, but we can work together here”

Mullendore's polite smile vanished again, replaced by a hard and questioning look. “And now you are here, talking to the Historian. Which brings me to my first question... do you know where this Dairon currently is?”

Archmaester Quent gave Lucas a completely neutral look, but it was clear what he was thinking. Leonard didn't look at Lucas, but Lucas knew the knight's opinion. If he revealed Dairon's presence in this room, Mullendore could protect him. But he would use him to favour Lord Hightower. And whatever Archmaester Quent knew, he made it clear that he wouldn't work with them anymore if Lucas would sell Dairon out to Mullendore...

[Don't reveal Dairon's position to Mullendore]

Jaron

“Well, this Robb seems to be a bit more dubious for me”, Jaron said, looking at Martin. “I will support you” Martin gave him a happy nod, while Harpy shook her head. “You'll regret that, Jaron”, she said with a light smile. “He won't shut up the whole journey to Robb's hideout. And if you're especially unlucky he won't even shut up while you're trying to interrogate Robb” Martin let out a bright laugh. “Ouch, mylady, what have I done to give you such a low opinion on me?”, he chuckled. Harpy shrugged and seemed to think for a moment. “Well... it would be easier to say what you haven't done”, she answered. “But I guess you two make a lovely pair”

Martin opened his mouth in protest, but Harpy cut him off by raising a finger. “Here's what you're going to do. Himani followed Robb to the poorer parts of the city. I mean the really poor parts. He owns a room in one of the houses there” She looked at Martin. “You know Tanner's Alley?”, she asked and Martin gave her a bold smile. “Oh please, I killed my first man in Tanner's Alley”, he stated with pride in his voice. Harpy rolled her eyes. “I'm sure the Alley will be glad to see you again”, she said. “Because Robb will be there. You'll enter the alley from the north, look for the third house on the left. Three stories. Robb lives right under the roof”

She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them again she looked stern, determined and worried. “In any way, don't underestimate him. Robb is an experienced fighter and if he is in league with Butterfly, he might be even more dangerous”, she warned them.

Martin rolled with his eyes and slightly pulled out a small dagger from his belt. “Well, he's in for a

surprise, because if he's one of Butterflies little bitches, I'm certainly more dangerous than him", he proclaimed. Harpy shook her head. "You underestimate him", she stated and as she looked at Jaron she had a worried look in her eyes. "Martin is a cocky fool. Make sure he won't kill himself, yes?"

Jaron's smile was meant to be reassuring, but the constant stinging pain in his ribs turned it more into a grimace. At least Harpy didn't look too reassured. "New orders", she stated. "Martin, you make sure Jaron won't kill himself" She caught Jaron's look and gave him a light smile. "Or maybe watch each other's backs, okay? We have lost enough good men"

"We'll be careful", Martin promised and took a bow in front of her, before looking at Himani. "And you stay safe too, yes?", he said. Himani looked from one man to the other and let out a short chuckle. "Please, Martin. I'm a poor beggar's boy inside of the Starry Sept, one of several hundred. Nobody will even notice me" He took a bow in front of Harpy before walking towards the door. "If anyone should be careful, it'll be you. There are cats in Tanner's Alley", he said with a slight smile. Harpy didn't seem to notice it, but Jaron saw her purse in the urchin's hand.

Himani gave him a conspiratorial wink before quickly moving down the stairs.

"Why are you smiling like the fool you aren't?", Harpy remarked, carefully eyeing Jaron, before moving her hand towards her belt. Watching the slow shift in her expression, as she started to realize, caused Jaron to burst into slight laughter. "Oh no, he hasn't!", Harpy exclaimed. "He hasn't! I'm going to kill that little brat!" And even though Jaron saw how she visibly tried to resist, she had to laugh herself.

The only one who wasn't smiling was Martin, who instead shook his head. "There are cats in Tanner's Alley...", he mumbled, which causes Harpy and Jaron to stop laughing. "Cats in Tanner's Alley..." Harpy gave him a worried look. "Someone just stole from me and you're not displaying your below average wit by mocking me? What's wrong with you?", she asked. Martin shook his head. "Nothing...", he mumbled, clearly not even convincing himself. "It's likely nothing"

His worried gaze met Jaron's. "But we need to be careful", he explained and Harpy gave him a slight pat on the back, resting her hand on his shoulder. "You're drunken, right?", she asked. "That's literally what I've said a few minutes ago" But as she looked past him, Jaron noticed that she was worried too. Martin shrugged, pushing her hand off him before moving to the door. "That blasted boy can't speak straight... maybe it was nothing, but I hate the sound of it", he explained. "I'll be waiting downstairs..." And with these words, Martin stepped out of the room, leaving a confused Jaron and Harpy behind.

"Now what's his problem?", Jaron asked. He had noted the sudden shift in the mercenaries' facial expression. Harpy shrugged, but took a step closer towards him. "Martin has seen a lot of things in this world. Perhaps he remembered something bad. Perhaps it was nothing. But... I

have never seen him that serious” She leaned in and gave him a light hug, much to Jaron's surprise. And even though she barely touched him, likely out of consideration for his broken ribs and arm, he felt uncomfortably warm. “Stay safe, please”, she whispered as she stepped back again. “I've lost enough friends in this war. Martin is a good friend and you are a good...” She stopped and her gaze hardened. “Could you please try to be less nervous?”, she hissed. Jaron opened his mouth to say something, but she cut him off by letting out a bright laugh. “Seven Hells, Jaron, it surely must be warm in here”, she chuckled and Jaron gave her a relieved nod. “Yes. It's warm”, he answered. Warm... Seven Hells! The effects of the cheap wine already wore off and he got painfully aware of how clumsy he must look like in her eyes. Her smile got a bit brighter, almost breathtaking, but Jaron noticed the look of pure mockery in her eyes. And he couldn't deny that it seemed to be a bit warmer in this room. “Well, since it really is quite warm here, I propose we go outside before Martin starts to miss you”, Harpy said with a soft smile. “You know, you make for a cute couple. A literal bastard and a figurative bastard, fighting against Butterflies” She stopped, noticed his stare and burst into laughter. “Come on! Try to imagine that. Perfect picture”, she urged him. No, no, no, he did not want to imagine.... oh Seven Hells! Harpy grabbed his healthy arm, slowly pulling him towards the door. “Perfect moment...”, she whispered.

Walking down the stairs painfully reminded Jaron of his ribs and he was thankful that he wasn't wearing armour. But with every step he felt better. Sure, it would take a while until he would be able to use a shield again, but at least his ribs felt almost healed. As long as he fought only with one arm, his wounds shouldn't affect him too much. Harpy watched him out of the corner of her eyes and still smirked, which caused Jaron to clench his teeth. Yeah... perfect moment...

They found Martin outside of the building walking in a small circle, his arms akimbo, his face dark. He was barely looking at them. “Maybe you shouldn't go back alone, Harpy”, he said as he noticed them. Harpy shook her head. “Martin, what is wrong with you? Himani dropped a small remark and you go all broody over it...”

Martin shook his head. “It's nothing... I just remembered something. Probably nothing...”, he said but his face proved that he was lying. Harpy let out a frustrated sigh. “Sure thing, Martin. Be secretive as much as you want. It doesn't really suit you” She turned around, looking at Jaron. “Perhaps this evening will cool you down a little bit”, she said with a big grin. “I will move back to one of our houses. Himani will contact you soon! And... stay safe, please” With these words she flashed an honest smile towards Jaron and Martin and walked down the alleyway, putting on her hood as she was slowly getting out of sight.

Jaron looked back at Martin who barely even looked at him. The knight let out a sigh and regretted it immediately as he felt his ribs again. “What is it, Martin?”, he asked. The mercenary

looked up and shrugged, before he started to walk down the alleyway, in the opposite direction of Harpy. "Follow me, I'll tell you", he sighed.

"You have heard what Himani said, right? There are cats in Tanner's Alley...", Martin started. Jaron gave him a curious look. "Yeah... it sounded cryptic. Like some kind of riddle" Martin gave him a nod. "Indeed. That's Himani, you know. Life is a game for him. He doesn't care for the consequences of not telling us what awaits us there. Tanner's Alley lies in a part of Oldtown that is heavily controlled by Butterfly. Only occasionally do we get to know what happens there. That means, Tanner's Alley is a blind spot for us. Anything could be there. Including the Cats...", he explained.

"Cats? Come on, don't start to speak like Himani. What's wrong with the cats?", Jaron asked, feeling slightly impatient. Martin closed his eyes. "The Alley Cats. Fucking Alley Cats. If Himani hinted at that, Butterfly just managed to buy some people who are even worse news than the Fang of Shadows. The Fang is simply an extremely skilled professional. If he sees you, he will kill you. The Cats however are what happens when people with the same mindset as Butterfly come together. Some of them are pretty good fighters, but all in all they are rather ordinary when it comes to experience. But... well...", Martin explained but paused for a moment. "The stuff they do... They are responsible for atrocities in the North and the Riverlands, got hired by slavers from Essos, by unscrupulous bandits, by Harren Hoare. They are wanted in Volantis, Braavos, Pentos and Lys. And trust me, as long as you have money, it takes a lot to make you a wanted man in Lys" His voice sounded bleak and he shivered for a moment. "And they have money. All of them wear masks, not the cheap stuff, but expensive craftsmanship, maybe from Braavos. The masks conceal their faces and look like, well, like cats"

This caused Jaron to pause for a moment. "Cat masks? What are they, mummers?", he asked in slight disbelief. Martin shook his head. "Bloody mummers, if anything. They don't bring pleasure and joy, only pain and fear and if you're lucky they bring death. Insanity is a running trait with them as well as a lust for all the things Butterfly likes to do... Thinking about it, it's a miracle he hasn't bought them earlier. They are basically meant to be together. Rapist, Murderers, child-killers, all united under a common goal. Trust me, you don't want to mess with the Alley Cats"

Jaron frowned as he heard that. Butterfly alone sounded like bad news. His underlings were already bad. But a whole mercenary group as bad as him, under his command? Perhaps it was a good thing that he came to Oldtown, that he worked with the Burned Man. Somebody had to stop Butterfly and his men before they would tear this city apart.

"I had a past run-in with them, during a job in Gulltown. Managed to kill one of them, but got stabbed in the process. Nearly bled to death. But the worst part was what some of them were doing while we found them... what they were doing to some local girls", Martin said and paused

for a moment taking a deep breath. "Trust me, it prepared me for some of the things I've seen here" He avoided eye contact, but Jaron knew the expression on Martin's face. He had seen it, mainly on the faces of old warriors, men who had seen terrible things. "How have you ended up here anyway?", Jaron asked.

"You know, at first this had been an ordinary job. I was hired as part of a group of mercenaries, working for the Burned Man. Nothing special. Beating a few people up. Killing a few others. Just business", Martin said and the hint of a smirk formed on his face. "In time I was trusted enough to play bodyguard for Harpy. And I admit, after that I also stayed for the... view... on top of the Burned Man paying wonderful money for something I would have done for free"

He caught Jaron's stare and his smile returned again. "Tell me you wouldn't enjoy it! And don't you even dare lying to me" He let out a bright laugh and Jaron had to join in. "However, I gave up any hopes in that matter months ago. That's why I advice you to keep your distance with her. The Burned Man won't take kindly to that"

For a moment, Jaron thought about denying it. Yes, sure he enjoyed her company but that was not Martin's business! But the way the mercenary looked at him... "Yes...", Jaron admitted. "I think I like her" Martin shook his head. "You like what you see and I can't blame you. But there's more to her. Harpy lived two different lives and both of them scarred her equally. She was born as a slave and raised as a criminal. Give her something to hate and all of a sudden she's not so sweet anymore. You killed half a dozen men? That's probably cute for her standards" His smirk vanished and he gave Jaron a stern look. "That girl is all you'll ever dream about if you can handle her. But I don't think you can"

This caused Jaron to narrow his eyes. What was wrong with Martin? That was none of his business. "And what makes you think I can't?", he asked, noticing that his voice sounded sharper than he intended. Martin shook his head. "You are a stranger in an even stranger city and a good man on top. She knows this city and trust me when I say that she is not a good girl. She might have been a diamond once, but ten years in Oldtown flawed her" Jaron gave him an irritated look. "Why are you telling me that?", he asked, his voice gaining sharpness.

Martin gave him a friendly smile. "Because you are a good man and she's a friend. I see the way you look at her. And I see the way she looks at you. She might be playing with you, but I doubt it. If you like her, I hope you're prepared for problems. From her, from the Burned Man, from Butterfly. I'd hate seeing either of you hurt"

Jaron started to relax again. The mercenary seemed to be concerned. "Why are you telling me that?", he asked. Martin shrugged. "Perhaps because I simply hate to see her hurt. Or...", he said and started to smirk. "Or perhaps I'm just an asshole who tries to keep you away from her, so that my zero percent chance with her might increase" He stopped, caught Jaron's look and

both of them started to laugh. "Just saying. Go after her if you want, but never forget what she is"

Jaron shook his head, still smiling. Martin gave him a sly grin. "I'm sorry, I'm just saying how it is. This is not one of your stories. The Burned Man is not a wise king, Butterfly is not an evil sorcerer. I am certainly not your loyal underling and, sorry for that, I would make a far better princess than Harpy" He paused for a moment as Jaron raised his eyebrows. "What do you want to say, Martin?", he asked, slightly annoyed.

"This is not a story. If you want her, you have to be a bit more realistic. Don't be a hero, Ser Jaron, because I don't think she wants a hero" He stopped and looked around for a moment.

"Ah... almost there. Tanner's Alley, just down this street for two more minutes", he said.

Jaron looked around. This part of Oldtown reeked of poverty. In his past stays in this city, he had never been here and the condition of almost everything here shocked him. The buildings looked run-down, the people were thin and pale, with sad eyes full of regrets and broken dreams. Two almost feral looking dogs were fighting each other over... over...

"So, what can you tell me about Robb", Jaron quickly asked, trying to get that image out of his head. Martin still looked at the dogs and at the... thing they were fighting over. "Fucking city...", he mumbled. "Robb comes from the Riverlands. He is not a bad man, like I said. I don't know him particularly well, but we have fought side by side several times. He had a rough childhood and uses that as an excuse to be an ass. His father used to beat him senseless as a hobby, but I'm asking you, who wasn't hit by his father?"

He paused for a moment as Jaron gave him a sly grin while raising his hand. "Fucking bastard...", Martin mumbled. "Who was your father either way? Must be someone big if you proudly name yourself 'Bastard'"

"Don't know him", Jaron answered. "My mother always told me he was a nobleman and I believe her..." He paused as Martin burst into laughter. "A nobleman? You're telling me you're a noble bastard? Maybe I should start calling you Lord Bastard?" Jaron joined in his laughter, but tried his best to keep a stern face. "Martin, one more joke and I put my sword in your eye", he warned him. This didn't stop Martin's laughter. "Lady Harpy once told me the same. But she used the word 'dagger' instead of 'sword' and instead of 'eye' she said 'crotch'" This time, Jaron couldn't refrain from grinning a grin similar to Martin's as he answered. "Yeah, that would explain a lot", he chuckled.

He stopped as Martin stopped, pointing at a small, dark alleyway. "Tanner's Alley. Of course, not a single tanner lives here anymore. They all moved south, closer to the harbour. But the name remained. Today only the very poor or very desperate live here", he explained as he looked down the gloomy street. "And maybe a few cats, if we're unlucky. Come on, I don't want to remain in the open around here" With these words he started to walk down the alley at a

considerable speed and Jaron had to hurry to keep up with him. "Only the poor or desperate, huh?", he asked. "Which one is Robb?"

"Both", Martin answered. "He's an alcoholic, only able to fight when he is sober and he's always depressed. Never laughed at one of my jokes" Jaron gave him another sly grin. He started to enjoy this! "That's not very hard, Martin", he answered and Martin gave him a surprised look. "Forget what I said earlier. You and Harpy belong together! The way you mock me makes me think you might be her in disguise. Pretty good disguise by the way. Anyways, Robb is poor and desperate, but he is not the kind of man who would betray his friends. He's poor for a good reason, you know" He pointed at a small door. "There it is. One of the rooms in there is his. Around this time he is usually pissed drunken, but we should be careful"

He opened the door, as carefully as possible and Jaron put a hand on the hilt of his sword. With a muffled sound, Martin drew his short sword and entered the building, giving Jaron a small nod to follow him. Before entering the building, the knight looked up towards the roof. A single, open window was located there, a small candle burning on the windowsill.

The two men entered the building as silent as possible and Jaron was once again glad that he wasn't wearing any armour. Sneaking around would have been impossible in chainmail. Martin was wearing light leather, but seemed to be used to it and moved in near silence. The building itself looked even worse from the inside than it did from the outside. The walls were moldy and dark, stained with dirt. Jaron saw a large splatter of blood on one of the doors in the small hallway they just entered. Crooked stairs lead up to the first floor, which wasn't a real improvement. If anything, it wasn't as dark as in the ground-floor. A small staircase lead up to the second and last floor and Martin went first. Jaron noticed that the sword in the mercenaries hand was slightly shaking.

They arrived at the third floor, albeit it hardly deserved this name. It was a single room with a small door leading to Robb's chamber. And Jaron heard muffled sounds from out of this room. Someone was talking... two men. He looked at Martin and knew that the mercenary was thinking the same. Robb might be innocent, maybe just having a harmless talk with someone. Or he was meeting one of Butterflies men in there...

[Try to eavesdrop on the conversation first]

Torvin

"This is going to be lovely", Harlan smiled, patting Torvin on the back like an old friend. Still, he avoided to look Harmund in the eyes and Torvin couldn't blame him. Even Harren Hoare's eyes were simply an unusually dark shade of brown. But he wasn't so sure if the same applied to Harmund. Staring too long in eyes like these couldn't be healthy in any way. People say that there is always a bigger predator. But in Harmund's case, it was hardly imaginable.

He forced himself to give Harlan a smile. "I'm sure it will be", he answered and for a moment he asked himself what exactly his problem was. That was the Old Way in it's truest form. Raping, killing, taking whatever he wanted... a thousand years ago, Harmund Hoare could have been the greatest king the world had ever seen. But the Old Way was dying ever since Harwyn Hoare carved an empire out of the Riverlands, with blood and iron. The Hoare's were no reavers anymore, they were rulers. Or at the very least they were supposed to be.

In the past ten minutes, Harmund Hoare had managed to gather a group of people in the courtyard, Ironborn of course, some of them visibly excited, men who hadn't raided for months and were looking forward for a little hunt. Gabin had eyed them nervously, sometimes looking up to the towers and Torvin was curious if the man had the guts to do what Harmund Hoare would demand. "Loosing your nerves, Gabin?", he asked calmly. The man gave him a startled glare, looking over to Harlan who wasn't even paying attention.

"Of course not", he hissed as an answer. "But I don't like this" Of course he didn't. Torvin felt uncomfortable and he was Ironborn. He could only imagine how much worse it would be for a Riverlander. Sure, there was nothing wrong with raiding, reaving, raping in general. Torvin felt no regret for the North, for the Reach, the Rock, for Dorne and the Stepstones. But the Riverlanders were their people and they were many. Sheep, yes, or rather fish. But for every Ironborn wolf there were five of them in the Riverlands, maybe even more.

"Why are you in this anyway. I see how much you hate doing this. Basically living in Harlan Hoare's backside, torturing, raping, killing. If you hate it so much, why don't you back out of it?", Torvin asked and Gabin's stare hardened. "You want to know why I'm helping you?", he asked. "Do you know Lord Orkwood? Reymand Orkwood?" Torvin gave him a nod. Reymand the Drunk, as he was called, a poor excuse for an Ironborn. The man would have been pathetic even in the eyes of the most pathetic Riverlander. A runtish weakling, a loudmouth with a foul temper, one of Harren Hoare's most powerful bannermen.

"Met him a few times", Torvin admitted. "Can't say it has ever been a pleasure" Gabin's frown turned into a quick smile. "Lord Reymand is indeed quite underwhelming...", he said and his smile vanished again. "All he is today is the work of his grandfather, who saved Harwyn Hoare's life at Fairmarket. His father used to hunt with Halleck Hoare and he... well, the king's most trusted drinking companion..." His voice got increasingly bitter. "A rapist and a fucking pig on top"

This got Torvin's attention. "I'm not sure if he has the parts for that", he said and Gabin gave him a glare. "Trust me, he is a rapist", he answered and let out a sigh. "My family comes from a small village near Seagard. Technically we're nobility, but the most we ever had was a larger farm. And we lost much, thanks to the Durrandon's and Hoare's of this world, who suppressed us for three hundred years..." He paused for a moment, before continuing with a bleak voice.

“Our farm was long gone, our good name was long gone. My great uncle was the last Strad who was a knight. He died to protect Peyton Mallister's life during the siege of Seagard. Died in vain...” Torvin had enough decency to try his best to look guilty. Seagard has been his families finest hour, as well as the Strad's darkest.

“Still we were living in that village. Me, my family... My brother Urid had enough common sense to leave the Riverlands with his girl. Last thing I've heard from him was that his wife gave birth to twins. My brother Saint was dumb enough to join the Night's Watch over a lost bet. And I was even dumber, for staying here. Whole fucking kingdom is rotten with men like that black-eyed bastard over there ruling over us” Torvin gave him an alarmed stare, looking at Harlan who hasn't heard a single thing. The prince was currently busy kicking a stray cat, while Harmund was talking to a group of hunters.

“I never had much, but I had a girl. The most beautiful girl in the Riverlands”, he said and his eyes got a dreamy look in them for a short moment. Torvin chuckled and shook his head.

“Everyone says that about his girl”, he answered. Gabin glared at him angrily. “When Orkwood visited Lord Mallister, he passed our village. He saw her and he wanted her. So he raped her, while his guards knocked me out. But he wasn't satisfied, he was insatiable. And he knew, he wanted her forever. So he took her as his Salt Wife, as your traditions allow him to do”, he answered angrily.

This slightly surprised Torvin. “But you said you were his bodyguard”, he said and raised his eyebrows. Gabin gave him a nod. “One of several. The one who cleans his pisspot. The one whom he insults whenever he is in a bad mood. The one who guards his chamber when he...” He closed his eyes. “Reymand Orkwood is a cruel man and he knows how to hold a grudge. I punched him in the face in an attempt to save her and ever since he takes his vengeance on me, by humiliating me day for day. And your king allows him to do so” Torvin avoided eye contact. Gabin was angry and he had every right to be. And Torvin understood why he was with them, despite his fear.

Loud laughter caused him to look up. Harmund Hoare had grabbed a young man by the shoulders and was slowly pushing him towards Harlan. “Hey Harlan!”, he shouted and Harlan gave him a startled look. “Yes, Harmund?”, he asked with a forced smile. Torvin looked at the man... no the boy. He was tall, very tall actually, but his height didn't manage to conceal his young age. He was likely not even twenty years old and had shaggy blonde hair which he kept at shoulder-length. And his blue eyes were filled with fear.

Harmund waited until the boy walked up towards Harlan, before kicking him violently in the knee, causing the boy to fall face forward into the mud. “Harlan, this is Hjalgar. Hjalgar, this is my disappointment of a brother”, he growled, violently pushing him up again. “And you'll look him in the eyes, you heard me? Don't you even dare to flinch again, you little shit”

The boy shivered, but seemed to force himself to look Harlan in the eyes. In return he only got an unimpressed look. "Yes, I see", Harlan stated. "What is with him? Are we taking him with us?" Harmund gave him a grin and smacked Hjalgar on the back of the head. "Indeed we will. You see, I just noticed him and gave him the honour of asking him a question. And he almost pissed himself. So I asked him if he was a fish or one of us. And, guess what, he claims to be Ironborn... He might be even more of a disappointment than you and your new pet here combined"

With the last sentence the prince looked at Torvin, who looked him straight in the eyes without fear. He wasn't afraid of Harmund. After a few seconds, the prince looked away, instead focusing his stare on the boy. "Turns out he has never hunted a fish before, despite claiming to be a good hunter. So I kindly offer him the honour of accompanying us" With these last words he moved his mouth closer to Hjalgar's ear. "Do you accept this offer, boy?", he growled.

Hjalgar managed to give him a fearful nod. "Yes m'lord", he answered. Harmund answered with an almost brotherly smile. "See?", he asked. "Wasn't that hard, was it?" He looked at Harlan, then at Torvin and finally back at Hjalgar. And with a quick, brutal strike he slapped him in the face with his armoured glove, causing the boy to fall down and cry out in pain. "It's not 'm'lord"! What are you, a little fishcunt? You will address me with 'Prince'! Consider yourself lucky, because next time I won't warn you! Next time you address me wrong will be the last time you have a tongue..." And he managed to sound just like his father.

Harmund looked back at his brother. "I figured you and your little whores will love this runt. Make sure he hunts something, but keep him with you at the end of the group" Harlan gave him a determined nod. "Of course, brother!", he was quick to say, before realizing what Harmund just said. "Wait... the end of the group? I thought I'll be your second-in-command"

Harmund let out a loud laugh, similar to his father's. "My second-in-command? Brother, the day I will give you command over anything more than your own sorry life will be the day our house burns to the ground. Vessels will ride at my side" With these words he pointed at a man in the distance. Torvin couldn't see him clearly, but he knew who it was. Rell Vessels, only son of one of Hoare's best captains, constantly accompanying Harmund whenever there is an atrocity to commit. Currently, Rell was wearing dark green clothing, befitting of a noble hunter. His long brown hair was falling up to his shoulders and he was carefully eyeing Harmund with a cautious look in his strangely golden eyes. As he noticed Torvin's stare, his mouth formed a cruel smirk. "You understood everything, brother?", Harmund asked and Harlan gave him a short nod.

"Good!", the prince roared. "Good! Tonight we're going to find tons of fish. Let the Riverlands tremble, for Harmund Hoare arrived!" He turned around, quickly walking up to his horse. Harlan shook his head. "He's a real sweetheart, isn't he?", he asked helplessly before walking to his horse. Hjalgar was looking up to Torvin, his stare a mixture of anger, hatred and fear. He was

bleeding where Harmund hit him and was breathing heavily. "What is it?", the boy hissed with barely concealed anger. Torvin gave him an apologizing nod. He felt a bit of pity for this boy...
[Try to be nice to Hjlagar]

Samantha

Oldtown was a pile of shit, only that it smelled worse, like a mixture of diseases, old men and dog shit. Samantha wrinkled her nose as she slowly made her way through the crowded streets. Even now, where the sun had almost set, she saw a multitude of dirty peasants walking around. Disgusting! On days like these, she missed Pentos, where even the beggars reeked of perfume. And she missed home, her families small farm near Karhold, six years and a thousand miles away. She had to close her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. The foul air did wonders in preventing her from remembering that day... her parents, her brothers, her little sister... She took another deep breath and suppressed the urge to throw up. Justice... yes, justice was all she could give her family now. Justice was somewhere in this city. Closer than ever, yet out of her reach. And for one moment, she forgot to inhale the almost narcotizing air.

She had been out, chopping wood when she heard the screams. Running back as fast as she could. Not fast enough... Their bodies... her father bleeding out, her mother stabbed to death, her brothers beheaded, their blood smeared all over their small living room. Her little sister, lying on the ground...

She took a deep breath again and blinked a tear away, her hand moving to her necklace... her mother's necklace. She had found him, the man who did this. She made him pay, with her axe, with knives and needles and with her fists. He had told her things that had enraged her even more. There was no reason for the death of her family, no reason except someone wanting to test a new weapon, a killer. Someone wanted to test a killer, wanted to find out if he was able to kill without mercy and worse. And he had picked a farm at random for that. She had made the killer pay dearly, oh yes... For a moment a grim smile flashed across her face. Before he died, the man had told her a single word and it took her years to find out that it had been a name... Family was important. Her father used to say it. Samantha would never make the mistake of seeing herself as a moral person. But if there was one thing she was proud of, it was her sense of family, not only her own. She liked Lunett. A sweet girl with a good heart. She deserved her family and Samantha was proud that she was able to be the one to bring her back. But Lunett wasn't her only reason. Lunett was a wonderful young woman, but Samantha would have never begged John to ride after her if this was only for her. No... of course Lunett was her first goal, Samantha would do everything to keep her safe. The same goes to these two knights. Lucas and Leonard. Great guys, probably in trouble. Sooner or later, every person in this city got in trouble. But they weren't her main goal. The man who ordered the killer to test his abilities on a

small, nameless farm at random, this monster lived somewhere in this city, hiding behind a ridiculous name... and she would show him how important her family had been to her! "Butterfly, Butterfly...", Samantha mumbled. Six years were a terribly long time to hold on to a vengeance. Six years to poison her mind with all the things she would do to him. Given the opportunity of course... And now she was here and, seven hells, right now she was too tired for some killing. Riding after these fucking knights had been harder than she thought. Two days. She had almost killed her horse in the hopes of catching up to them before they reached the city. And now she was almost as tired as the poor animal. There was justice waiting for her... tomorrow of course...

Butterfly, Butterfly...

The inn was one of the more luxurious of the city. An inn where wealthy sellswords would reside. Samantha wasn't a wealthy sellsword, but she liked to be a clean sellsword and a sellsword who won't get sick from drinking Oldtown's famous piss-beer. Aylard had given her some money for her services, enough to buy her a room for a week in this inn. Naturally, it wasn't comparable to Pentos, where even the beggars would have refused to sleep in this inn. But it was something. After giving the stable boy a copper coin, he was quick to care for her horse, while she could finally relax in the taproom. Maybe finding someone to share a drink with. Maybe justice was near, maybe death was near. Regardless, it was worth a drink. Maybe she could ignore the terrible bard playing a terrible version of 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair'. John would have knocked the poor bard's teeth out by now. And maybe, just maybe, she could get that smell out of her nose.

There was only one completely free table in this room and Samantha approached it with quick steps, sitting down and letting out a relieved sigh. Yes, this was good. Now she only needed to get out of that armour, maybe a warm bath... yes, life could be so sweet.

"That table is already taken", a female voice hissed. As Samantha looked up, she noticed a woman sitting at the table next to her and... well, hello... She was clearly a warrior, wearing an armour made out of boiled leather. Her dark blonde hair was tied to a long braid falling down over her back. Her olive skin gave her away as a foreigner, as well as the pretty strong accent. Samantha always had a thing for accents... And on her knees there lay one of these sickle-swords, these Dothraki cavalry sword things.

"Excuse me?", she asked, giving the woman a bright smile. She did not smile back. "You heard me. That table is already taken", she said again with a cold tone in her voice. Samantha looked around. There was nobody who seemed even close to claim this table. "And who sits here?", she asked, trying to maintain her bright smile.

"Not you", the woman answered. "Nobody. I just don't want anyone sitting next to me. So do me a favour and get the fuck away from that table" Samantha noticed that her own smile had vanished. "What the hell is your problem?", she asked, her voice sounding slightly irritated. The woman let out a sigh and put a hand on the hilt of her sword. "Listen...", she sighed. "I don't want to beat you up for sitting here, but I'm not asking again. Move away"

Samantha's smile returned. Ah, unfriendly people, they were always the same. With men she usually had to bat her eyelashes, give them a smile, the hint of a promise she would never fulfil and they were nice to her. Women were a bit harder, albeit Samantha was always good at getting what she wanted. And right now she wanted to sit down right here. She noticed the barmaid, a pretty young girl with long brown hair approaching her with the cup of wine she had ordered earlier and made a handwave in the woman's direction. "The wine's for her", she stated, earning her a surprised glare from the woman.

"You're giving me your wine?", she said, her voice oozing with suspicion. Samantha smiled at her and this time she noticed that the woman's cold glare seemed slightly less cold. "Try not to be too disappointed", she chuckled. "My name is Samantha Ducard"

The woman let out a sigh. "Sasha", she answered and Samantha gave her a curious look.

"Sasha? Unusual name. You're not from Westeros, right?" Sasha shook her head. "If you have to know it, no. I was born in Essos, in a nameless village somewhere between Sarnor and the Dothraki Sea. And that is all I'm telling you"

Essos... now that would explain the accent. And the dothraki sword thing... Sasha noticed Samantha's stare and slightly raised the sword. "It's called *Arakh*", she explained, sounding mildly annoyed. Her stare softened as she looked at the wine. "Look, thanks for the wine, but you still have to move"

Samantha gave her a surprised look. "Wait, what?", she managed to answer in surprise. Sasha let out a sigh again. "Nothing against you. I want my privacy. And I am going to meet a pretty dangerous man in a few minutes, a man who doesn't like being rejected. And if things get ugly I want to be alone"

Samantha responded with a bright laugh, slightly presenting her hatchets. She had cleaned them of course, but she liked to imagine that a drop of Bear's blood was still on them.

Dangerous man! That was cute...

Sasha gave her an irritated stare and was about to say something when she looked up. "Oh fucking hell...", she mumbled and Samantha noticed a man approaching them. He wasn't the most ugly man she had ever seen, but he was certainly gross. Soft brown hair covered his large head, his brown eyes lay deep in their holes and he had a tired look in them. A pathetic stubble covered the lower half of his face and the rest was disfigured by acne scars. And as he was approaching them, Samantha noticed that he was walking with a slight limp.

"Sasha", he exclaimed and gave her a bright, yet ugly smile. "You look great, as always" Sasha glared at him before laying her *Arakh* on the table. "Jaylon", she answered. "You look like some breed of dog, as always"

Jaylon narrowed his eyes and looked at Samantha. "You have company?", he asked, his voice sounding cold as he eyed her. Sasha shook her head. "She's nobody, nothing the great Longbow Jaylon Gordus has to worry about. I've heard you almost managed to get killed by a child, right? How's your leg?"

Jaylon did not answer to that, instead he gave Samantha a cold glare. "I want to talk to you alone. Or is she a mercenary? Will she join us?", he said slowly. Sasha shook her head. "And I don't want to talk to you, I just want to be alone. She's nobody and was about to leave either way", she answered, looking at Samantha. "Right?" But there was this look in her eyes that made Samantha believe that Sasha didn't want to be left alone with this guy...

[Stay]

Jenna

"Wake up, Jenna", a voice said softly. She opened her eyes and instantly regretted it as pain flashed through the left side of her head. But she was able to see. It was blurry, it hurt, but she was able to see, that was good... She slightly raised her head, causing her to moan in pain. Out of the corners of her eyes she saw someone approaching, limping forwards to the bed...

"Jenna", the voice said again and this time Jenna recognized it. She tried to smile but the pain in her left cheek caused her to drop the smile immediately, letting out another pained moan. "Shhh, easy...", her father said and this time she couldn't help but smile as he gently knelt next to her. She noticed the pain in his face as he went down and she felt tears forming in her eyes.

"Father...", she said. And then she smiled, despite the pain in her face, despite everything that happened, she smiled as he gently hugged her.

"Where have you been?", she managed to ask, her voice sounding rough, her throat feeling dry. Her left cheek was burning in pain as tears were flowing down her face. "It has been a rough week", he answered bleakly. "But I'm here now and I promise you, I will not leave again" He smiled, albeit she saw his face darken as he looked at her. "What is it?", she asked and the sudden realization caused her to look at him in shock. Her face! He was looking at her face. She remembered this... beast attacking her, pushing the knife into her left cheek... she felt panic overcoming her as she was looking past her father and... that wasn't her room! She was still in the castle, but that wasn't her room, that wasn't her bed. It was a different room, not much

bigger, but the bed was softer and there were books. A fire was burning in the chimney and it was warm, warmer than the servant's quarters ever were.

"Where am I?", she asked, looking back at her father, her voice sounding horrified. "In my chambers", a second voice, deeper and graver answered and her stare fell on the comfortable armchair next to the fireplace. Her eyes widened as Harris stood up, giving her a polite nod.

"Good morning, Jenna. How are you feeling?", he asked with a friendly smile. Oh no, no, no, not him!

Instead of giving him an answer, Jenna looked at her father in shock. He gave her a puzzled look, looking from her to Harris. The acting lord's face gave nothing away as he approached her. Jenna suppressed the urge to flinch as he knelt next to her father. "Why am I here?", she managed to stutter. Harris pointed at the fireplace. "Mainly because of that", he explained softly. "It would have been irresponsible to let you recover in the cold servant's quarters. The Lord's tower is heated, so I offered my chamber while I will move to the guard's quarters until you're feeling better"

A worried look fell upon his face. "And after what happened to you... and Halla..." He paused for a moment as he noticed her facial expression. "Ah, of course... you don't know. The same people who attacked you killed Lady Halla and three guardsmen, Brant, Derrick and Bannion" He closed his eyes for a moment. "You survived by a lucky chance. And because of your father" With these words he gave Richard a friendly smile.

Jenna didn't answer him. She looked at her father, noticing that she was about to cry again, this time not only because of the joy to see him alive. Lady Halla was dead. Dead! The housekeeper had tormented her for years. All the beatings, the insults... it was partially her fault that Ser Ilhan was dead. She gave her nightmares, made her weep and suffer. Jenna should feel good now. But she didn't. That wasn't her. Lady Halla was dead...

She noticed a small mirror lying on the table and pointed at it. "I... I need this... I need to see...", she stuttered weakly. Her father attempted to stand up, but Harris put a hand on his shoulder. "Stay", he insisted, before standing up himself. "Without a Maester around, I had to send for a healer from the village. Not as good as Eaton, but he sufficed" He grabbed the mirror, holding it gently in his hands. "He said it will fade, eventually" With these words he handed Jenna the mirror and she almost whipped it out of his hands.

Her face... of course it had never been pretty. But at least now everyone had to admit it. Still, it could have been worse. Her face itself wasn't damaged. Her eyes, nose, lips, everything still the dull, far too thin face she knew. But starting on her left temple there was a scar, deep and hideous, narrowly missing her eye, running down her cheek, ending just above her jawline. She had seen worse scars. It looked like the wound it was, a simple cut from a knife. She had seen

worse, had expected worse. The lord said it would fade, she was lucky, she was alive and it would fade...

Harris let out a sigh as he looked at her and at her father. "Richard, I know you want to talk to you daughter, but I have a few questions for her", he said with a polite tone in his voice. Her father gave Harris a curious look and didn't notice her alarmed stare. "That means I need to talk to her alone. I hate to separate you again, but I have to ask you to leave us alone for a few minutes"

"But... m'lord, please, just a few minutes alone with my daughter...", her father stuttered and Jenna felt her heart beating faster. Alone with Harris! Lady Halla was dead and she was supposed to be dead. And she knew who would gain the most from this... But... could he... He could and he would. He killed Ser Ilhan! Surely, killing the two women who saw him doing it would be nothing for him!

Harris shook his head. "I'm afraid I have to insist, good man. Please, wait outside. Only ten minutes and then I'll leave you alone", he said with a friendly smile. But Jenna saw something else in his eyes. Harris looked tired, not only physically. And for the first time she noticed the grey hairs in his red beard.

Her father gave him a nod. "If you wish it, m'lord. Ten minutes", he said reluctantly, before hugging Jenna again. Jenna had her eyes opened as he hugged her, resting her head on his shoulder, looking at Harris, who gave her an indifferent look, towering over her and her father. The lord even helped her father getting to his feet again. Jenna noticed that her father was limping heavily as he walked out of the room and Harris followed her stare.

"Your father loves you", he said as the door was closed and they were alone. "Your wounds weren't life-threatening, but his leg was in poor shape. From what he told me, the Lord of Bridges patched it up, rather crudely as I have to say. Still, he insisted that you'll get the healer's attention first and only allowed medical treatment on himself when I mentioned that he could loose his leg" He sat down in the armchair again. "Him rescuing you made it worse. It will be a while until he will walk without a limp again" Harris raised a small cup. "Do you want some wine? I managed to claim some Arbor Red from the kitchen" He attempted to give her a kind smile, but was cut off when she only gave him a frightened glare.

"No, m'lord", she answered and Harris let out a sigh. "You think I have killed Lady Halla, right?", he asked. Jenna closed her eyes and noticed something unusual. Right now, in this moment, she wasn't afraid of Harris. She had thought he was the monster, just as she had thought Lady Halla was a monster. And then she met the man who attacked her.

"Do I, m'lord?", she asked again with a toneless voice. Harris put the cup down again and shook his head. "It wasn't me", he insisted. "Do you think I am capable of killing Lady Halla? I've known her for almost forty years!"

Jenna shook her head. "I don't know what you are capable of, m'lord", she answered, still avoiding to look him in the eyes. Still, she noticed the sad look he gave her. "Listen, Jenna, I am sorry for Ilhan. I know you liked him" Sorry! He was sorry! After all he did, he was sorry! "I did what I had to do, for the good of Raylansfair", he insisted again and this time Jenna looked up to him, with hatred in her eyes. She wasn't afraid of him anymore! "Did you, m'lord?", she asked, her voice trembling with rage. As Harris answered, his voice got sharper too. "Yes. Then. Now. Always", he hissed. "I know it must be hard to see the good in what I did. But it was necessary. In that moment, it was necessary"

He sighed and shook his head. "You think I am some kind of cold-blooded killer, right?", he asked. Jenna suppressed the urge to give him a nod. Instead she didn't answer at first. Just as Harris opened his mouth again, she cut him off. "Are you, m'lord?", she simply asked. Harris closed his mouth again, before grabbing the cup of wine, pouring it into a small glass. He grabbed the glass with his hand, looking at it, before taking a deep gulp. "No", he answered. "Or at least that's what I like to think"

He put the glass down again. "His face haunts my dreams. His dying face, the blood. I am not a monster, Jenna. We weren't friends, but we respected each other. I never wanted to kill him", he said, his voice slightly trembling. Jenna had no pity for him. Not in the slightest! "Why have you done it?", she asked coldly and was surprised how easy this was without the fear.

Harris looked at her again, albeit this time she noticed that he avoided looking her in the eyes. "Because he had more honour than me. Because his loyalty differed from mine. Because he found something out I tried my best to hide. Something that would have destroyed this city if anyone would ever find out about it", he explained. "He wanted to contact the king! Mern Gardener is a good man, but blind to the smallfolk's struggle"

"But you aren't?", Jenna asked again, causing him to shiver. "I care for this city, Jenna, more than you could ever imagine", he answered. "Without it I would be nothing but a knight's bastard. People would despise me, they would look at me and see a bastard", he said and this time he looked her in the eyes again. "Tell me, Jenna, what do you see when you look at me? A killer? A monster?"

She saw a man close to breaking down, a tired warrior. She saw the regret in his eyes, but she felt no pity, no sympathy. Not for him, never! "What do you want me to see, m'lord?", she asked bleakly. This caused him to make a sudden handwave, pushing the glass down to the ground where it shattered. "Seven fucking Hells!", he hissed. "Ser Ilhan was my brother-in-arms! It wasn't easy for me and I regret it. I lie awake for hours every night, thinking about how it could have been. He would have informed the king and he would have appointed a new lord. Manfred Hightower, to be precise"

Harris paused for a moment, looking out of the small window in his room. "He and Robert hated each other, and Hightower is a man who knows how to hold a grudge. The smallfolk would have suffered for it. People like your father, good and honest men and women. When two lords have a quarrel, it's always the poor who have to pay the price for it. I wasn't willing to let that happen. I made a hard decision, perhaps even a mistake. But it prevented something that would have been even worse. With Hightower, a third of our population would be dead by next spring. The poorest of the poor, of course. Maybe even your father"

He raised from his chair, walking closer, but stopped as Jenna backed off, pressing her back against the wall behind Harris' bed. "I had to kill a good man to save many. I regret killing him, but it was necessary", he explained, looking at her urgently. She knew he hoped for...

Forgiveness? "If you think so, m'lord", she answered and saw Harris' face dropping as he sat down in his chair again.

"I know you hate me for Ser Ilhan and I expect nothing else. I don't expect forgiveness. The best outcome I am aiming for is that everything will stay as it is for Raylansfair, for you, for your father. If my plans work, nothing will change and you will never even know what I did for you", he muttered bleakly. Jenna closed her eyes. Was he lying to her? Was he deserving her forgiveness?

He seemed to wait for an answer, but as she remained silent, he continued. "Regardless of what you think of me, I haven't ordered the deaths of you or Lady Halla, I never did it and I never will" She noticed the sadness in his eyes. "You are a wonderful young woman, Jenna, and I have nothing but respect for you. And I knew Lady Halla for most of my life. We've been through a lot, you know?" He paused for a moment and Jenna noticed tears in Harris' eyes. "Once she was like you. A pretty young girl with hopes and dreams and fears. Trystane Raylan put a bastard in her and left to fight the Ironborn shortly afterwards. When Halleck Hoare sent his head back to Raylansfair, she lost the child in grief. She was alone in her bitterness and it changed her" He paused for a moment as he noticed Jenna's stare.

"Why are you telling me that, m'lord?", she asked. Harris closed his eyes. "Because I want to show you that I was unable to hurt her. You think we call her 'Lady' out of fear? It was a sign of respect, because in a different world, a world in which Trystane survived, she could have been a lady. She was my friend and seeing her face when I killed Ser Ilhan hurt me almost as much as the deaths of Robert and Eaton"

He paused again and blinked a tear away. The old Jenna would have forgiven him. The old Jenna would have spoken softly to him and would have been afraid of him. "I would have never hurt her, nor you", he urged her. Jenna's cold stare came back as she remembered him, bloody, beaten, shortly after he killed Ilhan. "And what would you do when I tell my father, m'lord?", she asked, with a voice as cold as ice. Was that really her asking all these questions? Harris, strong

Harris, noble Harris, a knight, a nobleman, a monster, reduced to a pitiful mess, because she wouldn't forgive him, because she refused to consider his arguments? Was that really her? Harris shook his head. "I would have never hurt you. I am a knight, Jenna. I am sworn to protect the weak. And that was what I did that day. I protected the weak from Hightower's wrath", he insisted again. Jenna gave him a nod and saw how his face got an expression of hope again. "If you say so, m'lord", she answered and watched the hopeful look in his eyes vanishing.

"I haven't hired these people to kill you or Lady Halla. And these guardsmen, I knew them. Derrick fought side by side with me in Blackhaven. Brent leaves a pregnant wife and a young daughter behind. Bannion was eighteen years old and dreamed of becoming my squire. They were my people and I could never do anything to hurt them", he said slowly and she saw that he was trying to believe himself. But she had no mercy for him.

"And if anyone of them would pose a threat for this city?", she asked. Harris shook his head. "You're clever, Jenna. An admirable trait. The answer is, I don't know what I would do. I like to think that I wouldn't do anything to them, but after Ilhan there are days where I don't trust myself anymore", he admitted. "I won't be remembered as the hero when history gets written and I don't strive to be a hero. I just strive to protect my people from the tempers of the mighty. And there is no sacrifice I am not willing to take. But I am not responsible for the deaths of Halla, Brent, Derrick and Bannion. I am not responsible for the attack on you"

This time, Jenna believed him. The look in his eyes... she knew she was naive, but she knew Harris for years. Up until that evening, he had been a true knight in her eyes. Maybe he still was, albeit in a dark and twisted way. And a true knight wouldn't order her death, right?

"I believe you, m'lord", she answered and saw Harris surprised stare. "You... you do?", he answered and a kind smile formed on his face. "Thank you" This time he sounded close to tears. "I had hoped you would stay away from the castle, you know? When I gave you a day off, I had hoped you would leave for good. That you would go somewhere safe"

Now it was up to Jenna to give him a surprised look. "M'lord?", she asked. Harris sighed again.

"I had already suspected it, but now I know it for sure. We're at war, Jenna. I am not entirely sure who the enemy is. Hightower maybe, maybe Harren Hoare, maybe someone else. We're at war, but it's not a war between soldiers. Knives at night, dead housekeepers and dead servants, threats, intimidation... our enemy is cunning and planned this for a long time. Whoever it is, I believe he is behind the deaths of Robert and Eaton. And that means, I am on your side", he answered, his voice getting stronger again.

Jenna wasn't sure if she could believe him. He was on her side? Was she on any side? She had done nothing in this ominous war, right? And then she remembered... she had told Septon Corbin the truth. He had sent a raven to Oldtown. What if someone caught the message? Was that enough to silence her?

"I had hoped that you would go. Somewhere where your knowledge can't hurt anyone. Any where your life is not at stake", Harris said again. "It would have been the best. For you, for me, for Raylansfair. But now... I am afraid I can't let you leave anymore"

And there it was again. Fear. Now she was afraid again. She gulped, forcing herself to look at Harris. "M'lord?", she asked with a shivering voice. Harris gave her a smile that was meant to be friendly. But right now it looked like a grimace for her. "These men who attacked you, they won't give up, you know? They will chase you, to the end of the world if they have to", he answered and Jenna felt panic as she was breathing faster. She knew he was right. But... but what would he do? Killing her before they would do it?

"That's why I have to keep you here, where I have a chance of catching them before they get you. I know, I am not in a position to speak of justice, but I intend to stop them. I will protect my people, as always, I will find those responsible and I will make them pay. If the gods have mercy, I will make them pay", he explained and Jenna noticed that she was shivering. "You and your father will live in the castle. We will protect you. And when they strike again, we will be prepared. They think we are defenceless and I intend to show them that we're not. They gave us a heavy blow, but we're not defeated, not even close" Jenna noticed that his confidence was back. His voice was stronger, he looked her in the eyes again.

"But I will need your help. I know you hate me and you have a good reason for it. I know you won't forgive me and I'm not asking for it. I'm asking for your help. There are a few things you can do for me, for this city", he said and looked her straight in the eyes again. "I won't force you to work with me, but if you want to make them pay for what they did, you should consider it" And Jenna considered it indeed. Justice... a strong word for him. That he even dared to speak of it made her almost sick. But he had a point. If he wasn't the enemy, she could work with him. But there was one more thing...

"M'lord... I was attacked, my father was attacked... will it be dangerous for us?", she asked and noticed that her voice sounded meek again. Her father... she had thought he was dead. Could she endanger him, regardless of the stakes? Could she endanger herself?

Harris gave her a sad nod. "I'm afraid it could be very dangerous. I will do my best to protect you from harm, regardless of your help. But I can't promise that you'll stay safe. And I know it must be hard to work with me, considering all that happened... But I have to ask. Please, Jenna, work with me and we might be able to bring them to justice"

[Work with Harris]

Willfred

They arrived at the village a few hours before sundown. The foul stench of rotten bodies, of burned flesh, of death filled the air. Of course, they had seen the smoke miles away. They

should have been prepared. Still, as Willfred rode into the village his first instinct was to throw up. He managed to keep his breakfast inside of him when he looked at General Tallian, who rode next to him with a neutral expression on his face. Two of his men failed at showing the same self-restraint as they looked at the remains of the village's population. Corpses, at least a dozen of them lay on the streets, some of them burned beyond recognition, some of them mutilated. It wasn't hard to imagine what happened to them before their death, but it was all the more harder to forget.

"May the Father judge over them", Willfred muttered. "May the Mother have mercy on their souls" Tallian looked up as he heard Willfred's prayer. "And may the Stranger visit whoever did this", he hissed and spat on the ground. Willfred gave him a cold glare. "These are dead people, General. Show some respect", he said. Tallian responded by shaking his head. "They are dead people, yes. They are not mine though. We are in the Reach, boy. These people are none of our concern", he answered.

Willfred closed his eyes for a moment. The training hasn't prepared him for this, no training could ever prepare him for this. "Perhaps they are", he said, opening his eyes again and focusing his stare on Tallian. "Two day's march into the Reach and we haven't met one soldier. If we can lead a dozen men into this kingdom without anyone noticing, the Ironborn could too"

Tallian stopped his horse in the middle of the village and descended, pointing at one of the corpses. "I don't think so", he said. "Look at this man, Willfred" He grabbed one of the bodies and Willfred took a closer look. The dead man wasn't burned or mutilated. It was a middle-aged man with blonde hair and a shaggy beard. But that wasn't the unusual part of his appearance. The man was armed. Clad in boiled leather, a small spear lying next to him. He was killed by a pitchfork being thrust in his throat. The farm tool lay next to him, still stained with his blood.

"Not an Ironborn", Tallian remarked. "And if you would have looked closer instead of closing your eyes, you would have noticed several of these lying around here. The villagers have put up some resistance and got quite a lot of them" This caused Willfred to look around, despite the gruesome sight. Next to a ruined barn lay two armoured men with arrows in their chest. Near the entrance to the village he saw a dead fighter, killed by a woodcutter's axe.

"So who were these people? Why have they attacked this village?", Willfred asked. Tallian shrugged indifferently. "I don't know and I don't care. These are Gardener's people and Gardener's problem" Willfred was only able to give him an angry glare. They had left Crakehall and his men behind two days ago when they crossed the border to the Reach. Entering a neutral kingdom with a dozen soldiers was one thing. Entering it with two hundred men was something else entirely. Now it was only him, General Tallian and a dozen men from Castamere. And the general had made it clear that he saw Willfred as little more than a stubborn boy, not able to follow his less than sound advice. Willfred was a knight and was raised worshipping the

Seven and following their ideals. Tallian's advice was cowardly, cruel and not how a knight should behave.

"Why are you so sure they aren't Ironborn?", he asked. Tallian picked up the spear, handing it to Willfred. "You see that wood? It's aspen, commonly found in the northern Reach, but uncommon in the Riverlands" He grabbed the spear again and with a quick movement he embedded it into the corpses chest. "As you can see, the leather is of terrible quality. The Ironborn have a lot of experience when it comes to working with leather. Lighter than steel or chainmail. Useful to wear on a longship" He threw the spear on the ground. "These men weren't Ironborn. Probably common bandits, maybe deserters"

Willfred shook his head. "Doesn't matter who they are. They killed innocent people", he insisted and looked at one of his men. "Check the houses for survivors!", he ordered. "And someone needs to check how many of the attackers got away" Tallian stepped closer and gave him a stern look. "Willfred, you can't mean to go after these men", he said in disbelief. Willfred only gave him an angry look. "And you can't mean to let them get away with that!", he responded. "Yes, I can", Tallian answered. "Remember what's at stake if we don't get Raylans men. You want this to happen to villages all over the Rock? Only that it will be worse, because common bandits are nothing compared to Ironborn. If yes, then go ahead, waste your time searching for bandits instead of searching for your uncle" Willfred clenched his teeth in anger. Yesterday they had passed a larger village. While the villagers had been wary about the soldiers, they told them something about a man from the Rock currently travelling the area, who claimed to be a nobleman and proved himself to be an excellent archer. All of these characteristics described his uncle Roger. Willfred had decided to follow this lead, eventually being directed at the village of Fairhaven. And here they were, Fairhaven being burned to the ground...

"No survivors found, mylord!", one of his men exclaimed, leaving one of the ruined buildings. Willfred closed his eyes again. What if Roger died here? They could have been in Raylansfair by now, maybe they could even be in full negotiations with the lord already. "Any of them being armed with a bow?", he asked. The soldier shook his head. "None, mylord! We found several of the attackers killed by an archer though", he explained much to Willfred's relief. He gave Tallian a triumphant look. "He was here", he said and despite the gruesome surroundings, he couldn't help but give the general a smirk. Tallian answered with a frown. "Yes, he was here. Well done, Willfred", he hissed. "Now we only need to find out where he went"

Willfred slowly rode towards the villages exit. His back still hurt slightly from the blow he received in the battle against the Ironborn. Luckily nothing was broken, albeit Tallian complained for hours about this wound. Two of his soldiers were already near the exit, one of them kneeling next to a dead body, the other one carefully examining the ground. "You found anything?", he asked. The one looking at the body gave him a nod. "Aye, mylord", he answered. "That one was

killed by an arrow, but the projectile is missing. Looks like someone ripped it out again, but without breaking it”

“Seven men ran out of the village”, the man examining the ground explained and pointed at something in the distance. “One of them didn't make it far” Willfred took a closer look, recognizing a body lying about a hundred feet away. Tallian stepped next to him and let out an approving whistle. “Your uncle has a reputation, but I have to admit, that is impressive”, he said. “Apparently he chased after these men. I have to apologize, mylord. If Roger is after them, they are our problem”

Willfred gave him another angry look. Sure, he understood that their mission was more important than helping the smallfolk. But this wasn't what a true knight should do. He was raised in the belief that a knight should help those in need regardless of the kingdom they live in. His father would have followed all of Tallian's advice. But he wasn't his father. “They would have been our problem in any way, because I say so, *general*”, he answered, ignoring the general's reply and moving his horse down the path. “We're going after them. It appears my uncle went after them too”

In only a minute, his soldiers were marching behind him. Even though they were tired, they weren't complaining about the fast speed Willfred forced them to march. “You're thinking like a knight, Willfred”, the general moving his horse next to him. Willfred looked up and raised an eyebrow. “Thank you, I guess?”, he answered and Tallian let out a small chuckle. “Wasn't meant as a compliment. You're Darren Reyne's heir. You can't afford to think like a knight. You have to think like a lord. Sometimes that means that you have to sacrifice your honour for the greater good”

Willfred shook his head with anger. “I can see why Crakehall had such a low opinion on you, general”, he answered. “It would have been better if you had stayed with the king” Tallian's chuckle grew into a fullborn laughter. “Trust me, I'm not enjoying this either. But if I don't accompany you, you'll get killed, reckless as you are”

Willfred opened his mouth to protest, but stopped as he looked at the path in front of him. A bifurcation was located in front of them. A man lay in front of a signpost, an arrow sticking out of his neck. “Roger's work”, Tallian remarked and one of the soldiers knelt down on the ground. “Looked like they parted ways here. Two of them ran east, down the road to Highgarden. Three of them ran west, to the coast”, the man explained. West... to Raylansfair! Willfred looked down the path. It was clear that his uncle took one of the ways, but that meant that several of the men he was chasing were about to escape... He could take one of these paths with his full company, risking to pick the wrong option and missing his chance at meeting up with Roger, as well as letting some of these men escaping. Or he could split his forces. Six men accompanying him

and Tallian, six men taking the other way. Sure, Tallian wouldn't approve of this, but did it really matter?

[Don't split up and take the western path]

Maya

"Tell me, child, have you ever heard about a town called Raylansfair?"

She opened her eyes and was met by complete darkness. Where was she... that voice... that was Royce! Where was she? Where was he? Where was that bronze bastard?

"As an official ambassador, you need to look like one of course. That's why I'm giving you a gift now"

There, again, right in front of her! Maya barely managed to breath in fear. He was here, he was close. *He saw her!*

"Perhaps I should thank the Bronze Lord for such a delightful gift..."

Brune's voice sounded directly behind her and made her almost jump in fear. She spun around, but still she saw nothing. Only darkness...

And then there were two small, blue lights shining in front of her... She took a step closer, but froze in terror as she realized what these lights were. They were eyes, shining in the darkness. And they slightly illuminated a face, a face paler than usual. The blonde hair was perfectly back-combed as always. But what she saw of the facial features looked waxen, unnatural. The hint of a smile was on the face, but something was not right with the teeth...

"Maya, hey, Maya"

What was that voice? That wasn't him, that wasn't his voice. His voice was soft, not this terribly squawking sound....

"You're actions will be gratitude enough", Royce hissed and his voice sounded deeper than usual.

And then she took a closer look at the teeth... her eyes widened in shock as Royce came closer, the light in his eyes finally illuminating the daggers in his mouth...

"Maya, are you awake?"

Something sharp touched her side and this time she opened her eyes, shivering in fear and shivering because of the cold. She closed her eyes again, half expecting to see the nightmarish version of Lord Royce again, as she was still trying to regulate her breath.

"Psst, Maya", Irving hissed, his voice far too loud to still count as a whisper. "I think I have seen something up there" Maya moaned, opening her eyes again. It was dark and it was cold. "Are you awake, Maya?", Irving asked again and she gave him an angry glare. "I am now", she mumbled. "What is it?" Irving pointed at the distant forest. "I've seen something up there...", he said. "And I'm cold. Can you start a fire please?"

This time she took a look around. Gregar was lying on the ground next to her, occasionally snorting. Ser Aldrik slept on the opposite side of the small camp they had build for the night, his direwolf lying next to him. The animal was apparently sleeping, but Maya knew how light it's sleep was. She looked at Irving, who was sitting between her and the cold fireplace. He had a small, sharp stick in his right hand and despite the fact that she was shaken over the nightmare, she managed to give Irving an angry glare.

"Have you just poked me with that to wake me up?", she hissed. Irving gave her an apologizing shrug. "Hey, I tried to wake you up several times. You were whimpering and I thought you might have a nightmare. I did you a favour!", he defended himself.

Maya let out a sigh, half out of annoyance, half out of thankfulness. That was the second nightmare this week. She had some problems with nightmares earlier, but hoped that this part of her life was over. Maybe she should consider working for someone else. Gregar worked for Lord Redfort, who was known as a wise and kind man. Perhaps he could make some arrangements after this mission was over. Perhaps it would be for the best to leave Runestone behind.

"Irving have you just awoken me to tell me that you weren't able to keep a fire burning?", she asked and let out a yawn. Next to her, Gregar grunted in his sleep. Irving shook his head.

"What? No! But... now that you're saying... it's cold here. Winter is coming, you know? I don't want to get sick because of your mission"

Another sigh, this time completely out of annoyance. "*Our* mission, Irving", Maya said with emphasis. Seven Hells, this guy got on her nerves! Irving raised his hands and rolled with his eyes. "Fine. Our Mission. No need to be the ass in ambassador", he moaned. "But there's something else... something's not right with that forest up there"

He pointed at the forest across the small meadow the were resting in. A small formation of stones gave them a good shelter from wind and rain and allowed them to watch the forest near them. According to Gregar, they were close to Raylansfair, maybe a two days march left. And according to Ser Aldrik, these forests were known to be relatively safe.

"Something is not right with that forest...", Maya repeated with a tired voice and looked over to it. Irving gave her a nod. "Yes. Look closely. You see the light?", he said. Maya narrowed her eyes, concentrating on the forest... no light, no light, still no... wait... there was something. A small light moving past the trees, deeper into the woods.

"I see it", Maya answered. "How have you even noticed it?" Irving gave her a proud smile. "I'm a watchguard, remember? I'm good when it comes to seeing things", he explained. Maya raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, you are", she said and his smile turned into a big grin. "And you're terrible at everything else", she added and saw his smile fading. Seven Hells, he really poked her with a stick to wake her up!

"What happened to the fire anyway? You can't tell me you're not able to keep a fire burning, right?", she asked. Irving gave her a shrug that was probably meant to be apologetic. "Hey, you can't expect me to stay awake all night after that march we had today, can you? But I wasn't asleep for long! Probably...", he explained, before his proud smile returned. "But look at it from that angle. If I would have kept the fire burning, that guy in the forest would have seen us. Maybe you should be a bit more thankful!"

Maya shook her head. Seven Hells, the gods punished her with Irving! No, she remembered, not the gods, but the Bronze Lord... "Or maybe I should poke you with that stick until you manage to do the most basic task possible", she answered. Before Irving could say something, she pointed at the forest. "Have you seen who it was? How many people? Were they armed?", she asked.

Irving shook his head. "How am I supposed to know?", he asked. "It's fucking dark out here, because someone, and that someone is you, decided to give me, of all people, the task of staying awake while all of you get to sleep" Maya closed her eyes and forced herself to resist the growing urge to strangle him. "Have you seen more than just that light?", she asked again, forcing herself to give him her brightest smile. This caught Irving off guard and he gave her a surprised look. "Umm... yes, but not much more. I think it was only one man. Couldn't see if he was armed. For all I know it could have been a woman", he stuttered and Maya raised to her feet, stretching herself. She was starting to breathe normally again, even though the nightmare still caused her heart to beat faster than usual.

"Why are you standing up?", Irving asked curiously. "I mean, sure, stand up, you can take over my shift" He caught her glare and started to stutter a bit. "Umm... I mean... I somehow think... that was not what you had in mind, right?"

Maya gave him a short nod. "Correct, Irving. I'm going to check the light out. Ser Aldrik said that this forest is relatively safe. And his wolf is asleep, so it can't be too dangerous" Irving glanced at the sleeping wolf, slightly shaking his head. "I'm quite glad he's asleep, you know? The way this beast looks at me... it's clever, more clever than Gregar, that's for sure. And I think it plans to eat me", he said.

Maya gave him a deceptively friendly smile. "If it helps, I don't think it wants to eat you. I doubt anything would eat you voluntarily", she said and Irving shook his head. "And that's *not* a bad thing", he answered, before standing up too. Maya gave him a surprised look. "What do you

want, Irving?", she asked. For one moment, Irving managed to look less annoyed than he probably was. "What does it look like, ambassador? I'm coming with you", he explained. She raised an eyebrow in surprise and Irving let out a sigh. "Listen, my options right now are either accompanying the strong and smart woman who broke the nose of that creepy wolf knight over there, after stabbing a fucking Riverlord to death, or staying with said creepy wolf knight and his monstrosity of a direwolf, who probably plans to eat me" He shook his head. "That's not even negotiable. I'm coming with you"

Maya opened her mouth to say something against it, but closed it again, simply giving him a surprised smile. "That was surprisingly sweet, coming from you, Irving", she answered and he frowned as he heard that. "Now what is that supposed to mean?", he asked. Maya let out a sigh. "That means you can come with me", she said before facing the forest.

"Hey, wait a moment", Irving said. "We should take our weapons with us", he said. "And I'm not speaking of these little knives the bronze lord gave you or my spear" He pointed at the sleeping Gregar. "Gregar has a bow and no use for it right now. I'm a good archer, I could use it"

He didn't seem to notice the mocking expression on Maya's face. "You mean to tell me *you* are a good archer?", she asked. Irving was quick to give her a nod. "Yeah. I know I'm a bit out of shape, but I was pretty good before arriving at the fucking Vale. Why are you asking? Do you think you are better than me?" Maya shook her head. She was an average archer, but she somehow doubted that Irving had any talent for archery. She somehow doubted he had any talent at all. But of course, a bow could come in handy when dealing with a potentially dangerous person in that forest. She should be able to hit a target, despite the darkness. But Gregar would be pretty pissed when finding it out...

[Let Irving take the bow]

Richard

As he left the chamber he closed his eyes for a moment. He was alive. Jenna was alive. But her wounds... she would keep them for the rest of her life. It wasn't just her face. Jenna would be okay with that, he knew she had never seen what she just lost. But he had seen the fear in her eyes as they were in the room, despite only him, her and Lord Harris being present. Jenna had always been sensitive, quick to be afraid. The early and horrible death of her mother had only made it worse. Richard could only guess what this attack did to her. He opened his eyes and took a deep breath. Wolfius was out there and had already proclaimed that he would come back. But this time, Richard would be prepared. This time, he would kill the beast.

He turned to his right as he heard someone approaching. Nora was coming closer, holding a wooden tray in her hands, laden with three small cups. She gave him a nod and looked at the door. "Everything alright?", she asked. Richard shook his head. "No, not really", he admitted.

"Wolfius is still out there, threatening my daughter and he won't stop until one of us is dead" He closed his eyes. "I won't let that happen. Today she is safe, but... I'm afraid, Nora. I'm afraid I can't be here forever to protect her"

Nora let out a sigh, which caused her to grimace and she had to put the tray down on a small windowsill. For a moment Richard felt guilty for telling her about his problems and forgetting the wound she received in her fight against Wolfius and that other woman. "Are you alright?", he asked and she gave him a short and quick nod. "Of course", she answered. "It's only a small contusion. Chainmail saved my life. But when that woman kicked me in the face... I'm going to return the favour next time I see her"

She looked him in the eyes for a moment, before looking at the door that lead to Lord Harris' chambers. "You say you are afraid?", she asked. Richard did not answer, instead he focused his stare at the door that separated him and Jenna. "Good", Nora said, causing him to look at her again. She paused for a moment. "I mean, it's not bad. I'm talking about being afraid. Fear shows you what's really important to you. It shows you what you need to protect"

Richard sighed and leant against the wall behind him to reduce the pressure on his wounded leg. "But how?", he asked. "How can I protect her if I can't even walk straight?" This time, Nora slightly smiled. "Who said anything about you doing it alone?", she asked. "You have friends right?" Richard shrugged and thought about it for a moment. Phillip and Urid were his friends, sure, but could he drag them into this?

"I haven't talked to them about this... hell, I haven't seen them since I was attacked", he answered. Nora shook her head. "Doesn't matter. They are your friends, right? They will have your back. And you have your brother" This caused Richard to make a sad smirk. "Yes. I have a brother", he muttered bleakly. "What happened to him anyway?" Nora didn't seem to notice the sadness in his eyes and gave him a happy smile. "He tried to hit on me... I guess", she answered. "He is quite charming, your brother"

Richard sighed and gave her a stern look. "Nora, my brother might seem to be a charming man, kind and eloquent, but there is only one person Alan cares for and this person is Alan. You should keep your distance with him", he warned her. Nora gave him a nod. "I know", she answered. "I'm not a little farmer's daughter, feeling flattered by the first kind words someone says to me. I know his intentions and I threw him out of the castle" She grinned deviously. "He was annoying a guard at duty, so I had every right to remove him from the scenery. He'll wait at the Pony for you, probably drowning his sorrows, while trying to hit on the barmaid"

Richard's smile finally started to become a bit more genuine and he had a hard time not chuckling. "Trust me, he won't have much luck with this barmaid", he said. The noise of the door getting opened caused him to look up. Jenna walked out of the door, a frown on her face, followed by Lord Harris, who in contrast gave Richard and Nora a pleased smile. "Jenna, we're

talking later about how you can help me”, he said and politely bowed his head. “I'm leaving you two alone for now. Nora, there are a few things I need to talk to you about”

With these words, he gave Nora a handwave, commanding her to follow. The guard smiled at Richard before following Harris, leaving him and Jenna alone. He noticed that Jenna was shivering and before he could say anything, she ran towards him and rapturously hugged him, tears flowing down her face. “I've missed you...”, she sobbed. “I thought you were dead”

Richard softly patted her on the back, feeling a lump in his throat, ignoring the pain in his leg and the pain in his arm. The healer had tended to both of his wounds and he was even able to use the arm, but a sharp pain flashed through it as he gently patted his daughter on the back. “I almost was”, he answered. “But I'm alive. You are alive. We will make this, I promise” Jenna let out a loud sob. “The... man who did this. He got away, right?” Richard gave her a reluctant nod. “His name is Wolfius”, he explained and tried to smile at her. Her eyes, reddened from crying stopped his smile and as he looked at the scar next to her left eye his facial expression turned to a frown instead. “But you hurt him”, he tried to reassure her. “He will think twice about coming back” It was a weak lie, but it was all he could do to cheer her up again.

Jenna shook her head, as he expected. “He will come back and he will kill me”, she muttered and Richard closed his eyes. “Not if I kill him first”, he answered and for the first time since he saw her, he saw the look of doubt in her eyes vanishing. “Make him pay”, she answered.

Make him pay... Richard shivered as he heard those words coming out of her mouth.

Vengeance... yes, he wanted vengeance, but Jenna? She was always the sweetest and most gentle of his children. Her brothers were hot-headed and full of anger, where she was calm and timid. He had to gulp as he thought about what happened to Jenna in the past week.

“Father...”, she said and her voice sounded more like herself again. “I will try to stop him” She shivered as she said that, but the look in her eyes was not the look he expected. For the first time in years, Richard saw determination in her eyes. And that worried him. Sure, Wolfius needed to be stopped. He had killed a young woman a week ago. And a few hours ago he had killed four people. He would continue and he wouldn't stop with Richard and Jenna. But Jenna... she was his daughter and he wouldn't allow her putting herself in danger. That was his responsibility. But he couldn't do that alone.

Before he could say something, she looked at the hallway where Harris and Nora had left.

“Harris he...”, she said and stopped for a moment. “He is not a good man. He did something terrible, but he can help us... if I help him”

This caused Richard to narrow his eyes. He had never talked to Harris Flowers before today, but he had seen him as a polite and surprisingly humble man, a man who would be worthy of becoming Lord Raylan's permanent successor. “What do you have to do for him?”, he asked.

Jenna shrugged. "I don't know yet. He said I should recover first. He would talk to me soon... I...", she said and stopped as her voice sounded tearful. "I don't want to die"

Richard didn't know what to answer to that. A few days ago he would have told her that she would be safe and he would have believed himself. But now? So many things have changed. Now there was only one thing he was sure of. He would do all he could to protect her. As long as he had some life left in him, he wouldn't allow Wolfius to go near her.

The sound of heavy footsteps down the hallway caused him and Jenna to look up. Two men were walking down the hallway, slowly coming closer. One of them was a young guard, rather awkwardly holding a spear in his hand. The other one... Richard's face formed a big grin as he recognized the man.

"Philip!", he called as he saw his friend coming closer. It had been almost a week since they saw each other and Philip had a wide grin on his face. "So the rumours are true", he said and his smile turned into a smirk. "You're back from the dead after all" His smile vanished as he looked at Jenna. "And... Jenna. I'm... I'm sorry" Richard saw that Philip tried to avoid looking at her scar and without a doubt Jenna noticed it too.

"Have you killed the man who did this?", he finally asked and Richard shook his head. "Almost", he answered. "What are you doing here?" Philip's smirk returned, albeit it seemed to be forced. Richard couldn't blame him. "Your brother is at the Pony right now. Announcing your miraculous survival. Me and Urid, we couldn't believe it, so I decided to check on you"

Richard sighed audibly. Alan, of course. Soon the whole city would know about his survival. Everyone would talk about him. That was uncomfortable. But it was a chance. A chance to gain help against the beast who preyed upon them.

"So... I think this might be a bad time to ask, but... your friends are at the Pony. Maybe you should... well, not exactly celebrate your survival, but...", Philip said and his gaze hardened. "But we should talk about what we're going to do about the man who did this to you. Planning our next steps. We can't live in peace as long as this madman runs around, killing our people, threatening our families. But, I guess you want to stay with your daughter for a while now, after what happened"

Richard looked at Jenna, who shook her head. "It's fine", she answered. "I want to come with you. I want to help" The look in her eyes told Richard that she was serious, deadly serious and it broke his heart to see her like this. He knew, Philip could help him. Urid would be at the tavern, Alan too. He didn't want to drag his friends into this. But he knew how Philip was. He would try to stop Wolfius, on his own if needed. Richard had to help him. But was he ready for this? And Jenna... was she ready for this? Could he really drag her into this even more? Part of Richard wanted to go. But part of him wanted to stay, wanted to console his daughter, wanted to help her

recover until this terrible look in her eyes, this look thirsting for revenge was gone. Could he really drag her into this deeper than she already was?

[Go with Philip to the tavern to plan your move against Wolfius]

Lucas

Without looking at Leonard or the Historian, Lucas shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ser Maron. We are just as clueless as you are. We hoped to find him here, but had no luck", he said and Mullendore sighed. "Well, that is unfortunate", the knight answered. "He could have given me the edge in our conflict with Butterfly"

Mullendore looked from Lucas to Leonard, finally shaking his head. "But we still have a common goal. We both want to find Dairon and we both want to keep him safe from harm, even though our ultimate goal differs. If you find any trace of Dairon, I have to know it. Lives depend on it" He looked at his guards and his face turned into a slight smile "There is one more thing. Something that might convince you about my intentions" He noticed the look in Lucas eyes and chuckled. "Don't look at me like that. I know how the fucking game is played. You don't trust me and being distrustful is usually a good thing in this city. But I know something that might change your opinion on a few things"

Lucas gave him a curious look. "What are you talking about, Ser Maron?", he asked. Mullendore looked him in the eyes. "The Hightower, where my guards ravens are held is located near the Starry Sept. From time to time, a raven intended to fly to the Sept finds his way to my rooms. A raven with from Raylansfair found his way to my rooms two days ago. So far, only me and one of my most trusted men know about the contents of this letter" He stopped and looked at his guards and at Quent. "I would like you to accompany me back to the Hightower, where I will give you this letter and where we can discuss a way to find Dairon in this city and to keep him safe" Lucas thought about this for a moment. Mullendore sounded honest. But he also knew that honest men were rare and hard to find. He would like to trust this man. But this was important, maybe too important to trust anyone. "This letter... can you tell us anything about it's contents?", he asked and Mullendore gave him a nod. "Without saying too much... it involves events that happened a few days ago, involving your acting lord, Harris Flowers. Let's just say, he fucked something up and you might want to know about this when planning your moves"

Mullendore raised from his chair. "Since you know nothing about this Dairon, I have no more questions for now. But if you want, we can go back to the Hightower immediately. I can tell you, the stuff that is written in this letter is important", he explained.

Leonard shook his head. "Why are you telling us about this?", he asked with a distrustful look on his face. Mullendore shrugged and let out a sigh. "Perhaps I'm just tired of fighting this war without allies", he said. "It would be nice to have someone at my side who is honest. My father

used to teach me these values. Honesty. Straightforwardness. He called it his sword in this web of lies” He shook his head. “He was too trustful. His own men killed him in his sleep, after the crimelord Iron Ivar paid them to do it. I try to uphold his values, but I combine them with the realism over fifty years in this city taught me”

He crossed his arms, slightly leaning backwards as he did it. “I don't trust anyone here, not even my own men. But you are knights from the countryside. My own values mean something out there. I want you to accompany me to the Hightower. I will give you the letter. You will read it and afterwards you will decide if you want to work with me” He looked at Lucas again. “Do we have a deal?”, he asked. Lucas looked at Leonard who slightly shook his head. Obviously, Leonard wanted nothing to do with Mullendore or Hightower. But what the knight just said... perhaps Lucas could help him without favouring Lord Hightower. And this letter... if it involved Harris, he had to know about it! “We have a deal, Ser Maron”, he answered.

Leonard let out a sigh and Lucas saw Quent frowning. Mullendore on the other hand gave him a cheerful grin. “That is great!”, the knight answered and was about to add something, when Lucas cut him off. “But we have something to discuss with Archmaester Quent first. We will visit you after our dealings at the Citadel are over”, he said. Mullendore's smile vanished, but he gave him a stern nod. “I understand”, he said. “I can wait. The letter is waiting for you at my office” With these words he took a clumsy bow in front of the Archmaester. “I am sorry for breaking into this conversation”, he said with an apologizing tone, before looking at Lucas again. “I will leave now. But I suggest you should pay me a visit as soon as possible”

Lucas gave him a nod. “We will, Ser Maron. As soon as possible”, he answered. Mullendore gave his men a signal and they turned around, walking out of the small chamber. “I'm looking forward for our next meeting. It's been a while since I've met honest knights. Together we can achieve something here, keep that in mind”

With these words he turned around, leaving Lucas, Leonard and Quent behind. As soon as the doors of the chamber were closed and the sound of heavy footsteps was gone, Leonard gave Lucas a furious glare. “Have you lost your mind, Flowers?”, he hissed. “Working with Maron Fucking Mullendore? One of Hightower's men?”

Lucas shook his head. “I won't work with him”, he explained. “But I need to find out what he knows. This letter... if it tells us anything about Harris, we have to know” Leonard sighed and slightly raised his hand in anger. “It's a trick. Who knows if he even has this letter?”, he said and this time Lucas tried to stay calm. “Like I said, I need to find this out. The letter could be important”

Quent cleared his throat, causing Lucas and Leonard to look at him. “I agree”, he said to Lucas surprise. “This letter could indeed be important. I don't trust Maron Mullendore and neither should you, but I know that he is not a particularly smart man. All this stuff about honesty? He

really believes in that. You should be careful around him, but using him to your advantage should be possible. Just, don't tell him anything about Dairon" With these words, the boy crawled from under the bed, getting back to his feet.

"I don't trust him...", he mumbled. "And I would like to go back to Raylansfair...", he stuttered. The Historian gave him a sharp glare. "Seven Hells, you need a backbone", he growled. "I am afraid you can't go back that easily" Dairon's stare changed from intimidated to scared. "What... what are you saying?", he stuttered.

Quent looked from him to Lucas and Leonard. "Besides this ominous letter, there is one useful thing this ox told us. Butterfly is after Dairon. I am pretty sure he is already watching your movements. Take him with you know and all three of you will be dead before you reach the city gates. We have to find a way to smuggle you out of this city without Butterfly noticing. For now I will hide Dairon with Archmaester Wulvren, where he will be safe as long as he won't do anything the Mage wants him to do. You two on the other hand..."

He gave both of them a stern look. "Now that Butterfly is involved, it will be dangerous for you. You will need allies. Maybe my help will suffice. But you should try to manipulate Mullendore to your own gain. Maybe he will agree to help you out of this city again", he explained.

Before Lucas could answer, he looked at Leonard. The knight still seemed to be angry, but this time he stood up and slightly moved his head, signaling Lucas to follow. "One moment, Archmaester", the knight said. "Me and Flowers need to talk about something first"

With these words, he walked towards the door. Lucas looked at the Archmaester, who raised an eyebrow. "It seems Ser Leonard has a problem with trusting me. Trust issues seem to be quite common for him", the old man hissed. "Go on boy, conspire with him, I don't mind"

Lucas gave him an apologizing look before walking after Leonard. He found the knight at the top of the stairs leading down to the ground floor of the tower. Leonard gave him a cold glare.

"Listen, Flowers, I don't know what foolishness caused you to do any dealing with Mullendore, but I have one question for you now... do you trust the Historian with this?"

Lucas shook his head. "Not in the slightest", he answered and Leonard's face softened up a bit. "Good. Because I don't trust him either. This bullshit about honesty from Mullendore? I don't think there is a single honest man in this city, him included. But that also means that Quent is a liar. He is the Historian after all. Perhaps he tries to manipulate us to his own ends, trying to get his hands on our archive. And now he wants us to find a way out of this city, while keeping Dairon in his reach... I don't like this, Flowers and I don't think we should leave him here. We should take him with us and protect him, from Mullendore, from Butterfly and from the Historian" Lucas closed his eyes. It was true, he did not trust Quent at all. But Mullendore told him that Butterfly was after Dairon. Perhaps keeping him at the Citadel for now would be the safest thing for Dairon. Or perhaps it would be the most dangerous choice...

[Agree to take Dairon with you]

Alys

Just as Alys thought it couldn't get any worse, it started to rain. Great. Now she was alone, freezing and soaking wet. And it was dark. Wonderful. She slightly rolled with her eyes and stroke a strand of wet, light brown hair out of her face. Well, she never needed that anyway. Dry clothes. A full stomach. A warm and comfortable bed. She knew what she would give up when leaving her father's castle. She never needed it. There was only one thing of importance for her and that was something she couldn't find in the North. Freedom.

She jumped over a deep looking puddle of water, her fine leather boots landing in the mud. That was probably one of the things she missed when thinking about her home. No mud. It was frozen, just like almost everything up there. Mud. Water. Trees. The occasional vagrant who thought it was a good idea to sleep outside in a kingdom that was called 'The North'. But especially the mud.

Her father's lands were located far in the North, her father's castle located directly at the Grey Cliffs and frozen mud were probably the most exciting thing happening up there. House Boleyn of Burmstone Keep, sworn to Karstark. She tried her best not to yawn in excitement, thinking about the possibilities her old life had for her. Being a good little daughter, a good little lady, a good little wife. Her father had tried to wed her to Lord Frostborn's eldest son, a man twice her age with a bastard son as old as she was. When she declined he tried to wed her to some Karstark boy, called it a good catch, the best catch she would ever make. The night he told her about this, she ran away. And she hadn't looked back, not when she left Burmstone Keep, not when she left the Grey Cliffs, not when she passed Karhold or the Dreadfort or Moat Cailin. Her first goal had been the Twins. For two nights she had slept in a small inn near Frey's castle. The next goal had been Darry, where she spent a night sleeping behind a stable. And her current goal was Rosby. And then? Who knew? Perhaps she could be free in Dorne. Or in the appropriately named cities beyond the Narrow Sea. There was only one thing she knew. She would not go back, just so her father could sell her off to someone.

Her boots were stained with mud. Back home, her father would have scolded her for it, like usual. She could almost hear his stern voice, telling her that a proper lady would not jump over puddles and run through the mud. Or fight. When Burmstone Keep's master-at-arms taught her how to use a sword, her father had almost send him away for it. Told her that the sword was for men. As she thought about it, she slightly shook her head. It wouldn't matter in Dorne. Not looking at her surroundings, she stepped into a deep pool of water, immediately soaking her boots. Seven Hells! Not for the first time she looked to the gargantuan castle behind her and not

for the first time she was stunned by it's strange beauty. Sure, it was built on blood as the saying went. But it's size had a certain allure. It was larger than Winterfell, Karhold and the Dreadfort combined. Five towers, each of them taller than the tallest building she had ever seen. Ten miles back and she would have a roof over her head for the night. Alys shook her head over that thought. She wasn't from the Riverlands, but she knew the stories. Harrenhal was no place for a girl.

The Riverlands in general were no place for a girl, at least not a girl who valued her freedom. Back home she had never encountered Ironborn, albeit the Glover's and Mormont's at the other end of the kingdom continually fought them. And even though Alys thought herself prepared from the stories her mother used to tell her when she was younger, she found herself not ready when faced with the cruel life the Riverlanders had. Just thinking about it made her angry. Back home there were animals who lived a better life than the majority of the Riverlanders. Nobody should live like that.

The distant sound of horns caused her attention and made her shiver. At least these kind of horns were familiar. Back home at the Grey Cliffs they served only one purpose. They were hunting horns, probably a few miles away. And for some reason, they filled her with a very uneasy feeling. Not quite fear, but it sent shivers down her spine regardless. Without even wanting it, Alys started to walk faster until she was almost running. Who would hunt during such a storm. And more importantly, what prey could be hunted now? She hated the answers to both of these questions. And she hated this fucked up kingdom!

Alys started to run now. She knew, she should have taken the road to Riverrun. Or even better, taken a ship in White Harbour. She could be in Braavos by now, or halfway to Sunspear. But she had taken the road in the attempt to see some adventures on the way. Well, from a certain viewpoint she had her adventure now.

She didn't even care to jump over a small puddle of water now, walking right through it this time, causing water to splash up to her knees. "Seven Hells", she mumbled as she noticed that water got inside of her left boot, leaving her with wet socks. Again, the hunting horns roared. Weren't they closer than before? Seven Hells, they were definitely closer! She looked over her shoulder and to her horror she saw a rider advancing. The horse wasn't galloping but still faster than she was with her exhaustion. For a moment she wasn't paying attention to the road in front of her, stepping into a puddle of mud, causing her to trip over and fall face forwards into the dirt. Seven fucking Hells, she really preferred her mud frozen!

In her horror, she saw that the rider had advanced almost to her position. But then she took a closer look on him. It was one man, he looked old and he was unarmed. And he had no hunting horn with him. A friendly smile was embedded on his face, albeit his eyes looked at her carefully. "Are you okay, young lady?", he asked with a worried tone in his voice. He seemed to

catch Alys surprised look and opened his mouth to give her an almost toothless smile. "Come on, stand up", he ordered her and she complied. "What are you doing out here in a night like this? Don't you know that Harmund the Hunter haunts the Riverlands tonight?"

Alys finally closed her mouth, wiping a bit of mud out of her face. "Harmund the Hunter?", she asked. The old man's smile vanished and he gave her a grim nod. "Aye. Harmund Hoare, the king's firstborn son and heir, hunter of helpless young maidens", he answered.

This caused her to narrow her eyes, reaching down to her boot and slightly revealing the fine knife strapped to it. The old man shook his head. "Not entirely helpless it seems. Still, you're no match for the Hunter and his hounds"

He reached down and Alys took a step backwards, eyeing him suspiciously. "What do you want?", she hissed, far more distrustful than she wanted to sound. In the distance, the hunting horns sounded again and the old man looked over his shoulder. "Six miles perhaps. I hoped they wouldn't go in our direction again", he mumbled before looking at her again. "You are obviously new to this area, or else you wouldn't walk around looking like this on a night like this. Our beloved king and his depraved sons like to celebrate special occasions by going for a hunt" He sighed. "They say man is the most dangerous game, but Harmund Hoare goes only for easy targets"

This caused Alys to narrow her eyes. "I am not an easy target", she insisted and the old man shook his head. "You are overconfident. The Hunter is a predator, a carnivore. Everyone is an easy target for him, especially lonely little girls, walking around Harrenhal after sundown", he answered.

"You make him sound like some sort of mythical monster", Alys snorted and the old man softly bowed his head. "That's because he is just like one, only worse", he said and his facial expression softened. "My name is Tomard, I'm a farmhand at Lincoln's farm a few miles south. Who are you, little lady?"

Alys let out a sigh and tried her best to give him a friendly smile. "Alys", she answered, probably a bit too quickly. Tomard gave her a nod. "Alys. A lovely name for a lovely girl", he chuckled. Alys distrustful expression returned. "You have an unusual vocabulary for a farmhand", she said and Tomard let out a small laugh. "And you have an unusual vocabulary for a little girl I've just met at the roadside. And your coat... it might be wet but I recognize good craftsmanship. You ran away from home, little lady?", he asked.

This caught her by surprise. "Lady? I am no lady!", she insisted and Tomard gave her a friendly nod. "Of course not. Little ladies don't travel with knives in their boots. It doesn't matter who you are, soon you'll be dead if you continue travelling down that road. The Hunter will catch you. His hounds aren't on your trail yet, but they will soon"

Alys felt her heart beating faster. The way Tomard said that made it sound so... ordinary. As if this happened often in this part of the world. This was not right. This shouldn't happen, not to her and not to anyone else. "What are you suggesting?", she asked. Tomard pointed down the road. "Lincoln's farm", he answered. "I am working for a retired soldier, Woody Lincoln. He's a good man, albeit a bit silent from time to time. During nights like these he keeps young girls from around the area at his farm, hides them and protects them. Lincoln is a good man and he might be your chance at surviving" He pointed down the forest to her left. "Or you try your luck running through the forest. Horses can't manoeuvre that good down there, which is why Harmund and his pack sometimes avoid it. Your choice, little lady"

[Try your luck in the forest]

Lyria

Lyria looked at the knife she just forged, weighed it in her hands and stroked over it's edge with her fingers. It was an ordinary kitchen knife, intended to be sold to the inn soon. Memories of the knife she forged for Wolfius came to mind. What was so special with this knife? Why did he wanted a knife with the sigil of Harren Hoare? Questions like these had kept her awake the last night. After her talk with Commander Nathamer, she had closed her forge for the night and even locked the door, something she never did before.

Still, Lyria was proud that she hadn't even thought about not opening her forge today. She needed the money, despite the more than generous payment from Wolfius. She hadn't told Nathamer about the money, in fear that he would confiscate it. It was blood money, that was almost certain, but she needed it. She wasn't proud of it, but she did what she had to do. Winter was coming and it would be a hard one. No matter how many lives Wolfius would take, he might have helped her and Rosalie unintentionally.

She put the knife down as she heard the sound of the doorbell. The first customer for today! "Rosie!", Lyria called her daughter. "Take care of the customer" Rosalie wasn't a particularly talented blacksmith, but her outgoing personality helped a lot when dealing with customers, something Lyria never really liked. She heard a short groan from Rosalie as her daughter moved to the forge's main room and looked down at the knife again.

Lyria wasn't a weaponsmith, or at least not a particularly good one. The Hoare dagger had been her masterpiece and even there she never really touched the blade itself. A sting of regret flashed through her as she thought about what Wolfius would do with this knife. He had murdered a young girl already, Nathamer had confirmed this. And the way he looked at Rosalie... Lyria was wary. With a bit of luck the city guard would find him soon, but she had no hopes there. Raylansfair's city guard was better than most city guards. About half of it's members had combat experience from fighting against the Ironborn. But they had no experience

when it came to finding a killer. Maybe they would find Wolfius by a lucky chance. But until then, she would be wary. She would lock her door at night and she would carry a knife with her. And she wouldn't allow Rosalie to go outside alone, especially after sundown.

Her daughters bright laughter caused Lyria to look up again. Seven Hells, the girl wasn't supposed to banter with the customers! Lyria put up a stern face, something that always came easy for her, and stepped into the forge's main room. Rosalie was leaning over the counter and gave the customer an unquestionably good view of her cleavage. At least the customer seemed to enjoy it. She recognized his short blonde hair, the stubble covering his jaw and upper lip and the infuriating smile he always seemed to have on his face. The blue of his left eye strongly contrasted with the green of his right one.

"Philip", she said and gave him a brief nod. She knew Philip briefly, most of what she knew came from Rosalie who apparently took a liking to him. Currently helping in the archive, yet without any steady occupation, occasionally working as a farmhand, one of Richard's best friends. One of the countless men she did not want to have around her daughter.

Philip had at least enough decency to look slightly guilty, which didn't stop him from giving her a cocky smile. "Hello Lyria", he greeted her and Rosalie turned around, on her face a smile quite similar to Philip's. "Mother!", she exclaimed in surprise. "Philip just told me something amazing!" This caused Lyria to raise an eyebrow. "Something amazing?", she repeated with suspicion in her voice. Philip turned to her, but not before giving Rosalie a wink. "You've heard that people thought that Richard was dead, huh?", he asked and Lyria gave him a nod. "Well, people can be quite stupid. Or at least wrong. He's been better, but he's alive"

Lyria exchanged a glance with Rosalie, who was grinning brightly. "Alive?", she asked surprised. "You tell me he has been missing for a whole week only to turn out alive?" Philip's smile got a little bit wider and Lyria closed her eyes for a moment. It wasn't that she hated Philip in particular, but people like him got on her nerves in general. He had this mixture of sarcasm and a cold attitude that usually led to descriptions like 'jerk'. But somehow he managed to be a popular man. Rosalie wasn't the only girl in Raylansfair smitten with him.

"Well, like I said, he has been better. Some fucker damaged his leg pretty badly. His daughter got it even worse. Richard prevented that guy from cutting up her whole face, but her wound will leave a nasty scar", Philip explained. "And even worse was the look in that girl's eyes. She's out for blood and Richard seems to encourage it" He sighed. "But I'm not here to judge his parenting skills. Just wanted to tell you, thought it might make you happy"

This surprised her. "Happy? Me? I mean, sure I'm glad he's alive, but why do you think it makes me particularly happy?", she asked. Philip shrugged as an answer. "Well... I don't know... people are talking, you know", he said and stopped for a moment. "Seven Hells your frown could make a dornishman cry"

His remark caused Rosalie to clap her hands and laugh cheerfully. "It's true, mother. You should smile more often", she said until a stern look from Lyria caused her to be silent again. She didn't like the direction this conversation was heading and furiously shook her head. "So... how's it going in the archive, Philip?", Lyria asked, looking at the man in front of her, trying to change the topic. "Have they found a true heir already?" Philip let out a small chuckle. "Is that your try at changing the topic, Lyria?", he asked and raised an eyebrow. "I mean... you can't just ask me something completely unrelated, you know?" Lyria shook her head. "I can and I will. How is it going in the archive?", she answered.

Philip sighed and looked at her sternly and a bit softer at Rosalie. "I've overheard them talking. And yes, they have found an heir. Two, actually. One of them is a petty lord from the eastern Reach. Not that bad from what I've heard... but the other heir... well, he's a big problem, not only for us, but for Reach", he explained, his usual smile gone, replaced by a worried frown.

Lyria and Rosalie exchanged worried looks and Rosalie asked the question before Lyria could open her mouth. "Who are the heirs?", she asked. Philip let out a sigh. "Lord Hobert of Mander's Mouth, lord of a small piece of land in eastern Reach. I have never heard of him before, but according to the archivists he is slightly more powerful in terms of soldiers as a result of him guarding a small part of the border to the Stormlands", he explained and Lyria noticed that his voice slightly shook as he said that last word. Was he afraid?

"Hobert has a very weak claim to Raylansfair, but a claim regardless. His father was married to a very distant relative of Lord Robert. The other possible heir has a similarly weak claim, but considerably more men under his command", Philip said and stopped again, looking Lyria in the eye. "What I'm going to tell you now mustn't leave this room. If the people learn about this, we might have a panic" Lyria and Rosalie gave him determined nods and at least in Lyria's case it was an honest nod.

Philip looked over his shoulder, as if he wanted to make sure that no one else was in the room. He leant forwards, giving Lyria and Rosalie a handwave to come closer. "Argilac Durrandon", he whispered and Lyria needed a moment to process this information. But as she understood what Philip just said she had to clutch to the counter. "Argilac Fucking Durrandon...", she stuttered. "The goddamn Storm King!"

Philip raised his hands. "Keep it down!", he urged her. "From what I know his claim might even be a bit stronger than Hobert's. But a foreign lord... even worse a foreign king as the lord of Raylansfair... Gardener will never allow this. And Durrandon will never allow anyone else to claim this title" Lyria gulped as she heard this. "So we're going to have war again. The Kingdom of the Storm against the Reach. Fuck...", she muttered. The last war against the Storm King claimed a hundred thousand lives and barely ended with a stalemate. To think that there could be war again... the thought caused Lyria to shiver.

"But that's not the thing I came here for", Philip interrupted her thoughts. "The Storm King is a problem for tomorrow. But today we have a far more urgent problem. There's a beast among us, who preys on our loved ones, more animal than man as Richard put it. The man who attacked him. Wolfius Woodbark"

The mention of Wolfius name dispelled all thoughts about the impending storm. Wolfius was the one who attacked Richard! A sting of guilt flashed through Lyria. Perhaps he used her dagger to cut Jenna Harking's face... "I know it's not the first time you've heard that name. We met him, you know? Richard, Urid and me, the night he attacked Richard. He almost killed him. And what he did to Jenna..." Philip said, before he paused and looked at Rosalie. "Who says he'll stop with Richard? Maybe you are the next target. Maybe it's Rosie... Listen, I know you don't like going out, but Richard, Jenna, Urid and maybe a few more are at the Pony right now. We want to plan our next steps and it would be nice to have you with us", he explained.

Lyria was about to decline out of reflex as Rosalie grabbed her arm. "I know you don't like this, mother. But I want to go. Please, please, let me go with him. If you don't want to go, let me at least go to that meeting. Maybe we can help", she urged her.

[Go with Philip and Rosalie to the tavern]

Drent

"STORM KING! STORM KING!", the soldiers chanted at the top of their voices. Drent Golton didn't join in, instead he simply put his arms on the railing of the wall, looking down on the courtyard below him. It was one of the few sunny evenings this autumn had for this part of the world and Storm's End was bathed in sun. It was in several ways a unique and remarkable castle. The wall, a hundred feet tall, nearly eighty feet thick on it's seaward side, was built in an almost perfect circle, surrounding a huge courtyard and the castle itself in the middle, a massive drum tower large enough to hold several thousand men, like the fist of a giant striking towards the sky in defiance of the harsh storms that gave castle and kingdom it's name. According to the legend, Durran Godsgrief, first of the Storm Kings, built the castle in defiance of the gods. Six times the gods of wind and sea destroyed the castle to punish Durran for marrying their daughter, Elenei. Six times he rebuild the castle, until the children of the forest came to his aid and wove powerful spells into the walls. And to this day the fortress defied the winds of Shipbreaker Bay and every army that tried to take it.

"STORM KING! STORM KING!", the soldiers chanted again and finally he stepped into Drent's field of view. Argilac Durrandon was a man of almost sixty years, nearly seven feet tall and with a presence that seemed to be even larger than his castle. Claims that he was the strongest man in his kingdom were probably wrong, if only because of his advancing age. He started to gain

some weight in the recent decade, but was far from being fat. His long black beard, without even a hint of grey hair, hid a pale, gaunt face that was still pleasant to look at despite countless scars and wrinkles. Piercing blue eyes carefully watched every step the other men in the courtyard made. On top of his head rested the Storm King's crown, an iron bracelet with two long, branched horns, giving it the appearance of a stag's antlers. And despite the fact that it wasn't necessary, the king was wearing full armour, heavier than most of his knights dared to wear, together with a yellow tabard, depicting the crowned stag of House Durrandon. In his right hand he was carrying the hammer his ancestors wielded, a huge, two-handed warhammer, larger than some men, with a single spike on top.

To his right, Drent noticed Ser Emphyrys Dresfel, one of the king's closest friends, a man half his age and with a similar interest in fighting. His hair was a bit longer than the king's, but he was clean-shaven, which highlighted several small scars in his face, as well as a single large one that curved from below his left eye under his mouth. Unlike the Storm King, Dresfel actually managed to get a slight tan from the many hours he spent outside.

"Shield Wall!", Dresfel commanded the two dozen fresh recruits who had taken position in the courtyard. A few days ago, Durrandon had broken the hand of his master-at-arms in a friendly brawl and ever since he had taken it upon himself to train the recruits. Watching this made Drent glad that he had finished his training several years ago. It has been hard, far harder than he had imagined it, but nothing compared to the personified storm that marched over the courtyard.

And the recruits certainly thought the same. Drent saw fear in their faces, as well as cruel smirks in the faces of the surrounding soldiers. They anticipated what was about to happen.

"You call that a shield wall?", the Storm King yelled, his thunderous voice booming over the courtyard. "You call that a fucking shield wall? I will give you a shield wall!" With these words, he raised his hammer, starting to run towards them. Three hundred pounds of fury, charging on a bunch of barely trained kids. Drent shook his head, watching his king "training" his new recruits. Half of them would be seriously wounded in this melee. The other half though... He took a look over the courtyard. Storm's End was home to five thousand soldiers, the Stormlands home to several hundred thousands. The largest army in the continent, the best army in the continent. Theirs was the fury.

The Storm King held back, at least slightly, or else he would have killed the first man he took a swing against. The recruit was more a boy than a man and the hammer hit his shield with enough force to make it splinter. The force of the blow sent the boy staggering backwards and downwards, dragging the two recruits behind him with him to the ground. The recruit to Argilacs right tried to land a blow on him, but was sent to the ground as Argilacs smashed the hilt of his hammer against the boy's jaw. Even from afar, Drent heard a cracking sound. Another recruit tried to smash his shield against the Storm King, who swiftly raised his hammer and hit the top

of the shield, sending it and its wielder to the ground. The recruit to his left got a punch in the face as he tried to hit his king, probably hard enough to knock out a few of his teeth.

"Inspiring, isn't it?", a voice next to Drent asked. He looked up and saw a man at least a head taller than himself, built like a rock, with a shaved head and the deep blue eyes often found with the Stormlanders. Drent stood attention immediately, like he was drilled to do. "Sergeant Montclair", he greeted his commanding officer. Jax Montclair was only a few years older than him, an accomplished warrior and leader of a unit of soldiers.

"Good evening, Golton", Montclair greeted him and gave him a short nod of his head as he leant on the railing of the wall. "Enjoying the view?", he asked completely serious. Drent gave him a short smile. "Sure. Nothing is more enjoyable than watching our king beating a few kids to bloody pulp", he chuckled, which earned him a stern glare from the sergeant. "He is training them", the man insisted. Drent looked down and saw the Storm King smashing his hammer against a poor recruit's knee, quite likely breaking it in the process. He looked back at Montclair and raised an eyebrow. The sergeant frowned and scratched his head. "You don't get the best army in Westeros without making a few sacrifices", he said. "King Argilac isn't invincible and he isn't the best warrior in the kingdom, albeit he comes close. The recruits stand a small chance against him. They learn how to endure heavy hits, how to hold their shield, how to make a counter-attack. It might be brutal, but sooner or later they learn" Drent shook his head. "Or they die. How many have we lost this year?", he asked. Montclair looked down at the courtyard again. "Five", he answered. "Five weaklings compared to the nine-hundred who joined our army this year. And out of these nine-hundred, only two-hundred died in the Marches. It's brutal, but effective"

Drent let out a frustrated sigh. "I never meant to be disrespectful, Sergeant", he said and Montclair shook his head. "And yet you questioned the king's methods", he answered. "In a real battle, the enemy won't hold back. King Argilac at least tries his best to keep all of them alive" Down in the courtyard, the Storm King had defeated his last opponent and raised his hammer over his head in triumph. The soldiers cheered at him, as Argilac shouted his victory across Storm's End. Drent noticed the slim figure clad in blue myrish silk standing at the balcony in the tower's highest floor, watching the Storm King training his recruits. Argella Durrandon had a temper that had some similarities to her father's at worst, as well as the untamed beauty her family was known for. But while Argilac was a personified storm in every aspect, Argella was like the sea, beautiful, admirable, yet not without cruelty, harsh, calm and unforgiving at the same time. With her pale porcelain skin, high cheekbones, shining dark blue eyes and long black hair, flowing in the wind, it wasn't hard to imagine that the Storm Princess had the blood of the gods of wind and sea in her veins. In the Age of Heroes, wars would have been fought to win her

heart. Even from afar, Drent noticed a grim smirk on her face. Her father's daughter from tip to toe.

Montclair cleared his throat. "I have an assignment for you, Golton", he explained and Drent gave him his full attention. The sergeant looked around, narrowing his eyes as he saw a few soldiers pass. "But not here. This assignment demands absolute secrecy" With these words, Montclair looked down to the courtyard. "The king will be involved", he added. Drent raised an eyebrow. "The Storm King gives out assignments that demand absolute secrecy?", he asked and tried not to sound too mocking. Still, Montclair frowned as he heard this. "Watch your tongue, Golton", he hissed. "If you need to know it, Lady Taniel is responsible for this assignment"

Ah, now that made sense. Lady Taniel was not a real lady, but among the Storm King's most trusted advisers, notably the only woman of low birth who ever made it that far. Rumour had it that she was sleeping either with him or with Lord Connington, perhaps even both. For Drent, she was a viper, her advice poisonous. Nothing good would ever come out of her involvement. "So, are we going to meet her?", he asked. Montclair gave him a short nod. "In the evening. You. Me. A handful of others", he explained and was about to add something when the sound of horns cut him off. A hundred feet below them, the massive gate of Storm's End was opened and Drent looked down into the courtyard. Five men slowly rode into the courtyard, clad in red clothes with black cloaks. All of them had silver hair and Drent didn't need to see them closer to know that they also had purple eyes. Valyrians. He fucking hated Valyrians!

"Aegon Targaryen sends his ambassador", he chuckled. "Seems like the Dragonlord has a hard time accepting 'No' for an answer" In the courtyard, the five men descended from their horses and took a deep bow in front of the Storm King, who was still casually wielding his hammer. Durrandon seemed to be mildly annoyed by them and did nothing to hide this. Drent saw them exchanging a few words and even from the distance he saw the dangerous look in the king's eyes. Durrandon gave the men a small nod and turned around to walk into his Hall. Ser Emphrys and the men followed, as well as several soldiers who apparently followed out of curiosity. In a few minutes, the courtyard of Storm's End was noticeably more empty.

Drent looked down to the gates that lead into the Great Hall. It has been a while since the Dragonlord had last sent a diplomatic mission to Storm's End. It would probably be interesting, albeit it was technically none of his concern. Montclair shook his head. "You want to see that? Some boring diplomatic meeting?", he asked. "They will talk for a long time about things you and I shouldn't worry about. Why don't we train for a while. It has been a while since I last saw you fighting"

"Is that an order, Sergeant?", Drent asked. He really wanted to watch this meeting, but couldn't refuse a direct order. To his relief, Montclair shook his head. "I'm not asking as your

commanding officer. It's your choice, Golton", he explained. "But trust me, that meeting will be a waste of time, as always"

[Train with Montclair]

Jaron

With his fingers, Jaron gave Martin a sign to wait as he sneaked up on the door. He could hear the muffled voices a bit clearer now as he pressed his head against the wooden door.

"So... *what would be my task in this scheme?*", a sullen voice asked.

"*It's easy, Robb. Butterfly makes his moves and he is close to defeat the Burned Man*", another voice answered, sounding a bit more muffled than the first, as well as a bit deeper. Jaron saw Martin putting a hand on the hilt of his sword and slightly shook his head. It was clear that someone working for Butterfly was in there, but storming into the chamber now could deprive them of valuable information.

"*I've heard that much. There is a reason why I'm considering this*", the first voice, apparently the man named Robb, said.* "But what would be my task?"*

"*Like I said, he is close to defeat him. But defeat is not enough for Butterfly. He wants to destroy the Burned Man, he wants to humiliate him. Before he grants him death, he wants to take away everything he loves*", the second voice explained.

"*You're talking about Harpy*", Robb deduced and his voice sounded a bit wary as he continued.

"*You want me to give her to Butterfly*"

As the second voice spoke, Jaron heard that the man was pleased. "*Indeed, Robb. You're more clever than you look. The winged bitch is probably the only thing the Burned Man truly loves.*

Sending her back to him, limb for limb, will break him", he explained. Jaron had to close his eyes for a moment and suppress the urge to just storm into this room and slaughter both men.

"*And how shall I do that?*", Robb asked.

"*You're a clever man, right?*", the second voice said with a mocking tone in his voice. "*You will think about something. You know how to contact us. As soon as you have her, we will arrange a meeting with Butterfly*"

Robb paused for a moment. "*Butterfly is meeting me in person?*", he asked and his voice cracked for a moment.

"*Indeed he will*", the other man clarified. "*Not only that... Butterfly is a generous man. Maybe he'll give her to you for one or two rounds, perhaps even before he starts to hurt her*"

"*A generous offer*", Robb said, still sounding slightly unsure. "*But I need some time to think about it*"

“Of course, Robb. I will leave you to your... thoughts. But don't think too long. Perhaps we'll find someone else who's more than willing to accept our offer. And remember, I know where you live”, the other man said. “Think about this, Robb. She is going to suffer either way, Butterfly demands it. Wouldn't it be good if you could be the man benefiting from her pain?”

Jaron looked at Martin, who gave him a short nod and drew his sword. This was enough. He would kill both of them! He stepped aside as Martin walked in front of the door, kicking it open with a single, powerful kick. He stormed inside, Jaron close behind him.

“What in the...”, Jaron heard Robb's voice, as he entered the room. It was small and a complete mess. A shabby mattress was lying on the ground, filled with stinking straw. The smell in general was breathtaking, a mixture of alcohol and piss. The floor was littered with bottles, most of them empty, but some of them filled with... something. The window was wide open and cold air was trying to dispel the smell. A young man was lying next to the bed, looking far older than he could be, with shabby brown hair and a dirty beard, hiding a swollen, red face. He looked at them in shock. And he was the only one in the room. Martin wasted no time and ran towards the window, taking a short look out of it.

“Shit”, he mumbled. “That other guy got away...” With these words he turned around, pointing his sword at the man on the ground. “You have a lot to explain, Robb”, he growled. Robb was looking from Martin to Jaron, a frightened look in his eyes. “Wait!”, he stuttered. “Wait, don't kill me!”

Martin raised his eyebrows. “And why shouldn't I? Give me one good reason”, he hissed. The frightened expression in Robb's face started to disappear. “Because that would be the most stupid thing you could do, Martin”, he answered. “It would deprive you of the opportunity to kill the Butterfly”

Jaron shook his head. “You're working for him, we've heard everything”, he answered. “Confess and I will give you a clean death” The look Robb gave him was somewhere between disbelief and disgust. “Who the fuck are you?”, he asked. “And have you ever heard about the term 'mole'?”

He let out a sigh and attempted to stand up, but Martin pushed him down again. “You want to tell me you are a mole among Butterflies men?”, he asked and Robb gave him a nod. Martin let out a small chuckle. “You're barely able to stand straight when you're not drunken. And you want to tell me that you infiltrated the Solvers?”

Robb looked at him and put a hand on the tip of Martin's sword. Slowly, he pushed it away and started to stand up. This time, Martin let him. “I know I'm not the most impressive sight, Martin”, he said. “Which is exactly why the Burned Man chose me for this task. Nobody would believe you if you would defect to the Solvers. Or the countless children who work for the Burned Man...

they owe him and they would never betray him. I on the other hand... it would make sense, right? That's why he chose me, to *pretend* to be a traitor"

He looked Jaron straight in the eye. "Whoever you are, I am working for the Burned Man for far longer than you do and he trusts me. I am no traitor", he urged him. "If you believe me, this little war can be over. You said you've heard everything... well, then you know what we have to do" Jaron narrowed his eyes as he heard this. "You're talking about giving Harpy to Butterfly, right?", he growled. "That's not going to happen" Robb gave him a confused look before looking back at Martin. "Seriously, who is this cocky little asshole? Is he the one making the decisions now?", the man asked.

Martin shook his head. "But I guess this doesn't stop him from deciding either way. Jaron, this is Robb, poor excuse for a mercenary. Robb, this is Ser Jaron the Bastard", he explained and paused for a moment. "He is new", he added with a slight grin. "So, why don't you tell us your brilliant plan?"

Robb walked towards the mattress and sat down again, pointing at a bottle standing on the ground. "You want some?", he asked. Martin viciously shook his head. "I'm still thinking if I should kill you, Robb, so don't push your luck", he answered.

Robb let out a sigh. "Your loss. It's good stuff", he said. "Anyways, the man I was talking to calls himself 'The Tom'. Wears a cat mask. Creeps the hell out of me. Leads a band of rapists and killers" Jaron looked at Martin who seemed to shiver for one moment. "I'm closing the fucking window...", the mercenary mumbled. "You talked to the leader of the Alley Cats... Fuck, we let him escape!" He looked at Jaron. "The Tom is one of the most dangerous men in this city, violent, unstable, psychopathic and working for Butterfly. And we just let him escape..." He pointed his sword at Robb again. "Continue!", he ordered and his voice sounded more aggressive than usual. "And don't you dare lying to me, or else it will hurt"

"Well, the Burned Man trusts me. He ordered me to spread rumours about my planned defection. I went to some taverns. Had some interesting talks. And one evening a few days ago, this creepy guy was waiting for me in my room. We talked for a while. I guess I've either earned their trust or their pity. And now he told me exactly what we need to do to lure Butterfly out of hiding", he explained and looked at Jaron. "Do you understand, Ser Bastard? I am no traitor. Trust me and I will give you Butterfly. Fuck, this is the opportunity we've been waiting for!"

Jaron looked to Martin, who seemed to be indecisive. "You believe him?", he asked. Martin shook his head. "Not one bit. He is hiding something. We have heard what he spoke with this fucking cat", he answered and his face got a grim expression. He took a step towards Robb and grabbed him by the throat. The other mercenary tried to retaliate but a quick punch in the stomach caused him to squirm in pain. "And I'm going to beat the truth out of you!", Martin growled. Robb shook his head in panic. "Fuck... fuck, Martin please don't do this! Shit, Ja..."

Jaren, please, you have to stop him! I'm telling you the truth, I swear by the old gods and the new!"

[Let Martin beat him up]

Ellena

The Ghiscari stayed true to their word, just as Ellena stayed true to her's. As she was walking down the streets of Oldtown with Abbas and Bakr, she couldn't help but grin as she remembered the look on the faces of Samuel and Jaylon as they were forced to leave the ship. Of course, Samuel had sworn to return, with more men and without mercy, but that wasn't her immediate problem at the moment. Even though she tried to deny it, Ellena was nervous. She really didn't look forward to meet this Burned Man. Currently they were walking through one of Oldtown's richer parts, the buildings consisting entirely of large mansions.

"So, Ellena, I guess you must be nervous", Bakr said with a friendly smile. "There's no need to be! The Burned Man is a real sweetheart when you get to know him" Ellena raised her eyebrows as she heard this and slightly shook her head. "If he's such a sweetheart, why does he call himself 'Burned Man' and works with slavers?", she asked with suspicion in her voice. Bakr opened his mouth in protest, but was cut off by Abbas. "Forget it, Bakr. That girl is obviously more clever than you. Which is not very hard, as I must add", he said and eyed Ellena carefully. While Bakr seemed to be genuinely friendly, with his wide smile and his attempts to make her feel better, Abbas had never smiled at her during their way through Oldtown and he hadn't even talked to her with any kindness. Ellena was wary around Ghiscari as a whole. The first law of Braavos prohibited slavery and no official from Slaver's Bay was allowed access to the city. The few Ghiscari who had dealings in Braavos traded exclusively in goods from the lands beyond Slaver's Bay. Even though he hadn't admitted to it, Abbas was a slaver. Everything about him marked him as a man who loved taking away the freedom of others. While she had a hard time disliking Bakr, she immediately despised Abbas. And he made no secret out of the fact that he wasn't her friend either.

"Yes, girl, Bakr and I are slavers. But currently we aren't enslaving anyone. Instead we are working for the Burned Man, using our skills in tracking people. And occasionally we sell him a few slaves", he said and his mouth formed a wicked smile. This last sentence caught Ellena off guard and she immediately stopped walking. "The Burned Man is a slaver too?", she asked and gave both of them an angry look. "You haven't told me that!"

Abbas shook his head. "Let me speak, girl!", he hissed. "The Burned Man buys slaves, but he is not a slaver. He buys them, then he sets them free and employs them. He mainly buys children, because their undying loyalty is easy to win"

Ellena was still unsure if she should continue walking. So, this Burned Man wasn't a slaver. Still the way Abbas pronounced the word 'employs' gave her an uneasy feeling. She had heard about these people. They were in every large city in the known world. Not even Braavos was safe from them. The orphanage where she had lived the worst months of her life had a man like this too, who was employing the children, who paid them terribly low money and forced them to do horrible tasks. But he could also protect her friends from Butterflies wrath. She didn't like it, but at least he was technically no slaver. She started to continue walking and for the first time she saw a cold, yet pleased smile on Abbas' face.

"Why is he called 'Burned Man'?", she asked and a cruel streak formed around Abbas' mouth. "Because that's exactly what he is. A burned man. When Butterflies men call him 'cripple', they aren't that far away from the truth" This answer didn't satisfy her curiosity at all. "But why is he a burned man?", she asked again.

"Because he did something that deserved punishment", Abbas answered. "I don't know much about him, but more than others, mainly because I witnessed his punishment. Most of Yunkai's wise masters witnessed it. The Burned Man wasn't born a slave, but through circumstances I don't care for he was enslaved and sold to Master Razdal zo Yunzak, a man known for his exceptional cruelty. But still, what the Burned Man did must have been pretty severe, or else Master Razdal would have just crucified him"

He paused for a moment and his wicked smile returned. "It was thirteen years ago, I was young and foolish at the time. And I admit, I had nightmares from hearing his screams", he explained. "Master Razdal bound the Burned Man to an iron pole, four iron poles actually, one for each limb, as if he was intending to quarter him. But that would have been merciful compared to what he did" His cruel smile got wider and Ellena could almost see a fire burning in the slaver's eyes. "He tied the Burned Man up eight feet above the ground and put large iron braziers under each of his limbs. And then, Master Razdal started a fire"

Bakr cleared his throat and gave Abbas a stern look. "My friend, do you really think this is a story you should tell a child?", he asked. Abbas shook his head. "No. But she asked", he answered and looked at Ellena. "Try not to imagine the sight and the sound and especially not the smell, this foul stench of burning flesh, mixed with bloodcurdling screams, the sight of a man flinching in pain as the flames were burning just high enough to cook his arms and legs without actually burning them. And don't try to imagine how much worse it was when the flame underneath his left arm burned higher than intended, high enough to burn through the ropes. His left forearm landed in the fire and by the time he managed to pull it out of the fire it was burned black like charcoal. For two days they kept the fire burning, most of the time they kept him awake by hitting him in the face. After they were done with him, he wasn't even able to walk without excruciating pain anymore. And Razdal, the ever cruel and cunning Master Razdal

denied him the mercy of death. Instead, he set him free and threw him out into the streets, where he was supposed to live the few days he had left in unbearable pain”

As Abbas looked at Ellena with his dark eyes, his smile widened. “You are pale, little girl. Do you regret asking?”, he said with a mocking tone in his voice. Ellena quickly shook her head and suppressed the urge to throw up. A vivid imagination was a blessing and a curse at the same time. “As cruel as it was, it sent a message. Master Razdal made them watch, all of his slaves and most of the Wise Masters took their chances and forced their property to watch too. Up to this day, Razdal zo Yunzak has the most devoted slaves in Yunkai”, Abbas explained and in this moment Ellena hated him, for the hint of joy in his eyes, for the casual tone in his voice.

“Why isn't he dead?”, she asked. “The Burned Man, I mean. You said he was supposed to die. How could he survive this?” Abbas shrugged. “I don't know. I assume it was partially determination. When they removed him from the poles, I took a closer look to this man, this burned man, crippled for life. And what I saw in his eyes scared me. The fire consumed him, but he refused to break. And so it changed him. And he refused to die”, he explained.

Bakr slightly shook his head. “Yes, the Burned Man is determined”, he said. “But wounds like that... he wasn't able to walk or to grab things and his agony was severe enough to still trouble him up to this day, thirteen years later” He paused for a moment and grabbed the golden horseshoe he was wearing on a chain around his neck, gently stroking it for a moment. “I grew up among savages from the great grasslands. And they have cruel ways to punish those who wronged them. Still, victims of their torture usually die from far less. I think he had help. Without help, he would have died”

Abbas gave him a slight nod. “Yes, I've thought the same. Sure, she was a child at the time, five years old, but she always had a certain sort of cunning inside of her”, he answered and looked at Ellena. “We're talking about Harpy, the Burned Man's handmaiden, second-in-command, adopted daughter, occasional honey trap, whatever he needs”

Bakr gave her a wide smile. “Oh, you're going to love Harpy and she's going to love you. She adores clever little girls”, he promised her. Abbas shook his head. “I wouldn't be too sure about that”, he growled and pointed at a house to their right. “But enough of that. We are here, at last” The house was huge, even larger than her father's house in Braavos. Four stories, surrounded by a small wall, large wooden gates, windows out of the finest glass. “That's the Burned Man's house?”, Ellena asked slightly surprised. Abbas gave her a nod. “One of his allies from out of town had the kindness to buy it and to give it to him whenever he needs a more luxurious hideout. The Burned Mansion, quite literally”, he said and chuckled. Ellena gave him a short glare. “I see why nobody in Braavos likes to trade with you”, she said. “Being around you is poisonous for a girl's humour” The look on Abbas face was worth every scary story he told her on the way and she couldn't resist to imitate one of his smug smiles.

They approached the mansion, Abbas to her right and Bakr to her left like an unwanted honour guard. As they reached the large door that lead inside, Abbas knocked and exchanged a short look with Bakr. After a moment, the door was opened. A young woman, perhaps only a few years older than Ellena, stood in the door. She had the comely facial features of a Ghiscari woman, albeit paired with the lighter skin people from the Free Cities sometimes displayed, paired with dark reddish-brown hair a bit lighter than the hair of Abbas' and Bakr's beards. A sly smile played around the corners of her mouth.

"Abbas, Bakr!", she greeted them. "I'd say it's a pleasure to meet you, but that would be a lie.

Come on, step inside, but wipe your feet. I don't want to have any Yunkish dirt in this house"

The room behind her was lavishly decorated and the heavy use of gold and silk would have been enough to make a Pentoshi nobleman green with envy. The woman looked at Ellena and her smile got a bit more friendly. "And I see they brought a guest. What's your name?"

Ellena gave her a suspicious look. "Ellena Terys", she answered. "I'm here to talk to the Burned Man" This gave her an approving look from the woman. "A girl knows what she wants, right? You're very decisive, I like that", she said and took a short bow. "My name is Harpy, I am the Burned Man's closest associate"

"By the gods, are you drunken mylady? Perhaps you've enjoyed the time with your bastard knight too much", Abbas interjected, which caused Harpy to look up and narrow her eyes. "I'm not drunken", she insisted. "And he is not my bastard knight!" Her voice gained a bit of sharpness as she spoke, but as she looked at Ellena again her face softened. "So, you know who killed Butterflies men, right?", she asked. Ellena gave her a short nod and Harpy put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on then, the Burned Man would like to speak with you", she explained and started to walk deeper into the mansion.

"Keep your gaze focused, Harpy", Abbas shouted as he and Bakr remained in the entrance. "Or else he'll notice" Ellena noticed the subtle anger on Harpy's face, but as the woman turned around, she looked calm and collected. "Thank you for the advice, Abbas. Why don't you and that other dolt go back to your ship, we'll call on you when we need you" She turned around again and continued walking, Ellena noticed that her hands were clenched. "I hope they weren't bothering you too much", she said and Ellena shook her head. "I guess I was bothering them a bit more", she answered. Harpy gave her a short nod. "Good. Abbas likes to tell scary stories to little girls. But he wasn't scaring you, right?", she answered. Ellena shook her head again and Harpy stopped in front of a large door.

"We're here. Listen, the Burned Man's appearance might frighten you...", she started to say, but Ellena cut her off, shaking Harpy's hands off her shoulders. "I know. His arms and legs are horribly burned. Abbas told me the story in great detail. I guess he enjoyed it", she explained. Harpy slightly shook her head and Ellena noticed a sad look in her dark eyes. "It's a good thing

that he doesn't know half of it", she answered. "But he got the basics right. Still, the Burned Man's appearance tends to frighten children who've never met him before"

Ellena gave her a slight smile. "I'm not easily scared. After all I survived a walk with Abbas without having to change my pants. That guy has something about him...", she said and shivered exaggeratedly. Harpy reciprocated the smile. "That's truly impressive. Abbas might be a bit more scary than the Burned Man, I have to give him that", she answered and walked towards the door. "Anyways, it's time to meet the Burned Man. Don't want to keep him waiting" She opened the door, revealing a small, tastefully furnished room behind it. The furniture was dark, a heavy wooden desk was standing in the middle of the room. And it was uncomfortably warm and stuffy. Two huge men with dark amber skin were standing behind the desk, their skin colour giving them away as Dothraki. Between them sat a man who was shorter than Ellena thought, perhaps roughly at her height. He had pale skin and short dark-brown hair, as well as bright blue eyes. All in all he was looking quite ordinary, albeit she had to admit that his facial features could be seen as handsome. She looked at his hands and gulped. Abbas hadn't lied to her regarding the extent of his burns. She had no medical knowledge, but knew that it must have been a small wonder that he was even able to keep most of his left hand.

Harpy gave him a soft smile of deep affection. "Abbas and Bakr returned from their job", she said. "And they have brought a guest with them. This is Ellena. Ellena, this is the Burned Man", she introduced them. "Go on, Ellena. Take a step closer, you are safe here"

Ellena took a step closer towards the man in front of her. She wasn't afraid of him, not at all. The Burned Man was simply a crippled old man, from what she saw he shouldn't even be able to grab things with his burned hands. She wasn't afraid of him. The Dothraki behind him on the other hand... "Welcome, Ellena", the Burned Man said with a deep baritone voice. "I am glad you decided to seek my help. Please, sit down. We have a lot to talk about" As he said that he smiled a warm and fatherly smile. "I apologize for the heat in here. There are days where cold air causes me pain and I'm afraid today is a day like this. But if you want something cold to drink, we have cooled...", he explained but Ellena cut him off by shaking her head. "I'm not thirsty", she answered.

The Burned Man gave her an understanding nod. "I know you have heard about me. Abbas never misses an opportunity to tell everyone what a monster I am", he said. "And, to get that out of the way, most of what he says is true" The way he said this sent shivers down Ellena's spine. "When compared to Manfred Hightower, or the High Septon, I fully admit that I must look like a monster. I raise children into a life of crime. I have no problems in silencing my enemies. But the people I am up against... they cross lines even I would never dare to cross"

He paused for a moment and Ellena saw an understanding look in his eyes. "I see...", he mumbled. "You already know what I'm talking about, right?" He looked at Harpy, who was

standing slightly behind her. The young woman gently stroked Ellena's shoulders. "Fang and Longbow arrived at the ship before me and Martin were able to get there", she explained. "Jaron escaped by a lucky chance. And I guess Abbas and Bakr did something useful for once"

Ellena shook her head. "I... I stabbed the man named Jaylon in the leg. And there was a third man. I...", she stuttered and the sudden realization of what she had done caused her to look at her hands in shock. "I killed him", she mumbled. She was taught not to fear death. Nobody in Braavos feared death. Still... the thought almost made her sick. "If it would be okay, I think I would like something to drink now"

Harpy stopped stroking her shoulders and moved towards the door. "I'm right back", she said softly. And then they were alone, Ellena, the Burned Man and his Dothraki bloodhounds. The Burned Man looked... pleased? It was hard to tell. "That must have been hard", he finally said. "But I assure you, this man deserved it. You did something brave and you should be proud of it. You saved yourself" He smiled. "And I thought I have to send Abbas and Bakr to save you", he chuckled. "I'll add that to the things I've been wrong with"

His smile faded. "But enough of that. You are here for something very specific, right?", he stated and she gave him a nod. "Yes. This man, Samuel Harrington, he vowed to return, he killed one of my friends and I'm afraid he will kill them all should he return", she explained. "I want protection. And in return I will tell you what I know about that night in the alleyway"

The Burned Man nodded affirmatively. "The Fang of Shadows is capable of killing all your friends, I can assure you that. But he is just a man. I can protect your friends. And your deal seems to be quite fair. Then let me ask my first question. Who killed Butterflies men?", he asked and looked her straight in the eye with a stern gaze.

Ellena let out a sigh. "His name is Terroma", she said and noticed a slight shift in the Burned Man's face. Just for a moment he seemed to be a bit wary. "About fifty years old. Wears his hair to a short ponytail. His teeth are crooked and rotten, as if he has some kind of disease", she added to see how the Burned Man would react. As she mentioned Terroma's teeth, she saw him gulping. "Thank you for telling me about this, Ellena", the Burned Man answered carefully. "He sounds like a very special person if he is able to take on three Solvers at his age" He stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. "I won't lie to you, Ellena. I never lie if the truth is a viable option. If Terroma is who I think he is, he is one of the most dangerous men in this city"

This didn't come as a surprise for Ellena. She had seen what he was able to do. The three men in the alleyway stood no chance. But the Burned Man seemed to know more. "Who is he?", she asked. "Tell me more about him!" Her curiosity finally got the better of her, but it was mixed with disappointment as the Burned Man shook his head. "You like him, it is clear to see. I see the same look in Harpy's eyes when she talks about me. I don't want to destroy your illusion like I destroyed hers. Keep seeing him the way you do. Kids your age need someone to look up to"

He paused for a moment and closed his eyes. "You know where to find him, right?", he asked and Ellena gave him a short nod. "Good...", he answered. "There is something you could do for me. A small request. I leave it up to you, completely. I will protect your friends regardless, if only to stop one of Butterflies vile plans. But if you want to help me in return, I have something you could be interested in"

He let out a sigh. "I want you to bring Terroma a letter. If he is the man I think he is, he will be highly interested in it's content. It could be important for me and for him likewise. But I want you to know that it could also be dangerous for you. Butterflies men might be on his trail already. And while I think he is in no danger from them, the same does not apply to you" He seemed to force himself to smile at her, his smile reminded Ellena of Terroma. "But like I said, I leave it up to you. Would you bring him a letter from me?"

[Agree to bring Terroma the letter]

Garthon

Holding back? Vermont Redloon dared to ask him to hold back? The thought was amusing, as well as outraging. If anyone would deserve a little thrashing, it would be that guy! A fish who tried to be iron! He wanted a fight and he would get it! Ironborn never held back! Or at least not for scum like Vermont Redloon...

"So, Breaker what do you...", Vermont started to say but was cut off when Garthon punched him in the face. He heard a satisfying crunch and saw his opponent staggering backwards, bellowing in pain. "You fucking...", he exclaimed, but Garthon was faster and punched him again, again in the face, further damaging the man's nose, almost sending him to the ground this time. Instead of going down however, Vermont let out an angry howl and charged towards Garthon, grabbing him and throwing him to the ground, while jumping on top of him. The air was pressed out of Garthon's lungs as he let out a surprised and pained groan.

"You little shit!", he shouted and Garthon saw that the woman from the tavern was standing at the window, carefully watching their fight. George had a hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to intervene if possible. By the Drowned God, hopefully it wouldn't come that far! "Little Fishcunt you are! I'm going to teach you some manners!", Vermont screamed and Garthon had to give him credit for staying in his role despite his obvious anger and pain. At least until Vermont's fist hit him in the face, almost causing him to blacken out. "You fucking bastard broke my nose!", Vermont shouted, hitting him again, this time causing him to nearly black out.

"Role...", Garthon managed to utter weakly as Vermont raised his hand again. The riverlander showed no mercy, hitting Garthon's temple with his closed fist. "Fuck... Vermont...", Garthon mumbled again, feeling his senses numbing. Vermont Redloon wasn't exactly taller or stronger than him, but unlike Garthon, he was furious and that gave him a frightening advantage.

Garthon managed to land a punch in his opponent's face, which barely slowed him down. Maybe he was a bit too much in his role! Like a hammer, Belmont hit him in the face again, this time hitting Garthon's cheek.

The faint sound of steel being drawn reached Garthon's ears. Belmont paused for a moment and looked over his shoulder. George had drawn his sword, pointing it at Belmont, his face distorted with anger. "Get. Away. From him", he pressed out with clenched teeth, his sword slightly shaking with anger. Belmont let out a small chuckle and to Garthon's surprise he raised. Immediately, he took a deep breath, cold air filling his lungs again.

"What do you want, runt?", Belmont growled, putting a hand on his belt, grabbing the hilt of a small knife. "Do you want a fight? Do you want me to kill you?" He was breathing heavily, but Garthon saw him slowly cooling down a bit. Still fighting the growing urge to slip into unconsciousness, he attempted to get to his knees, but fell down to his side again, the numbing feeling in his face almost causing him to lose consciousness. "This is madness, Belmont", he mumbled and Belmont looked at him. "This is fucking madness and you know it. You took it too far"

Belmont gave him a furious glare. "I took... I took it too far?", he exclaimed, wiping a bit of blood off from his nose. He looked at George again, who still stood with his sword in hand, ready to fight. And he let out a sigh, taking a step closer towards Garthon. "I told you not to hit me in the face. Better think about something to make up for it, you asshole, or else you will regret that", he growled, before kneeling down next to him, grabbing him at the collar. "You *will* regret it." He pulled Garthon back to his feet and narrowed his eyes. "The king will hear of this. Only thing that might calm him down will be that Trident bitch in the tavern. Better bring her back to Harrenhal for... further interrogation" With these words he finally let go of Garthon and looked at George. "Next time you point that toothpick at me will be the last time you will point it at anyone", he growled and started to walk away, to the inn's stables. "See you fuckers in Harrenhal!", he shouted and entered the building.

George shook his head and took a step closer towards Garthon. "Asshole", he mumbled. "Are you okay, Garthon?" His face got a worried expression as Garthon needed a moment to give him a nod. "It's okay", he answered and smiled at the boy. "Thanks to you" George's face lit up as he heard the compliment. "I was afraid he would kill you", he said and Garthon shook his head. "He probably wouldn't have. Let's go inside, I could kill for a beer"

His legs were slightly shaking as he was walking into the tavern, where the brown-haired girl was still standing at the window. The Harper had stopped playing and was sitting at the table, together with the other man. The girl gave him a worried look, visibly less hostile than before. "Is everything alright, good man?", she asked with concern in her voice. "You look horrible" As she

had said that, she opened her eyes widely. "I mean... not horrible in that way. But you're bleeding!"

"It's nothing", Garthon answered, even though he clearly felt otherwise. His last fight had been a while back and he knew he had underestimated Vermont. Without George's help, he would have lost for sure. "He just took me by surprise"

"Well, you took him by surprise too", the Harper answered. "Tell me, how do you know Vermont Redloon?" Unlike the girl, he sounded a bit more cautious, almost distrustful. If Garthon had any intention to rat these possible traitors out to the king, he would have been wary around this guy. But he wouldn't do that. Perhaps these people could even be allies in his attempt to kill the king. After all, if they are indeed parts of the Sons of the Trident, they had a lot more experience in defiance than he had.

"We live at the same castle", he answered and decided to tell them at least part of the truth.

"Harrenhal" He saw their faces dropping and quickly raised his hands. "No need for hostilities. I'm in no shape for that anyway. My name is Garthon Breaker"

The Harper pointed at a free chair next to him. "My name is Jon. This charming young lady is Dacey and the man next to me is Jared", he explained as Garthon sat down. George gave Dacey a shy smile and Garthon suppressed the urge to roll with his eyes. She wasn't bad looking, but there were plenty of better girls available. Terrible timing to develop a crush. "I... I am George", he introduced himself. "George Rivers" Garthon was surprised to hear him using the bastard name he technically wasn't entitled to use, but at the same time he was impressed as he realized the boys reason behind it. The girl flashed him a smile and the Harper seemed to be pleased. "A Rivers is always welcome among us", he said. "Jared here is a Rivers too, albeit he prefers to be a Hunter now. And I was born a Rivers too"

Jared slightly grinned as the Harper mentioned him. "We can't really choose our surnames, right? What was your quarrel with Vermont Redloon?", he asked and looked at Garthon. "I insulted him. You have heard about him, right? It's quite easy to insult him", he answered and at least in his ears he sounded convincing. These people probably wouldn't react kindly to learn that he was ordered to rat them out, no matter the fact that he never intended to go through with that. "Said some thoughtless line about his mother"

This caused Jared to laugh. "Son of a bitch", he chuckled. "He got you bad. Need a mirror?" Garthon shook his head. "Not the first time my face get's bloody", he answered and immediately regretted it as the Harper gave him a slightly hostile look. "What exactly are you two doing for a living?", he asked. Now, that was an interesting question. Somehow, Garthon was pretty sure that 'Raider' wasn't the answer these people wanted to hear.

George answered first, slightly surprising Garthon with his initiative. "I am a guard in service of Lord Edmyn Tully", he explained with pride in his voice. This seemed to please Jon again. "Tully

is a good and honest man, but he lacks initiative. He cowers under the tyrant, but he has not lost all of his honour, like the lords Bracken, Darry or Frey have”

“Tyrant, eh?”, Garthon said. “Dangerous word to use these days” Jon attempted to say something, but Dacey was quicker. “It's the truth”, she said and Garthon had to shake his head. That girl spoke so quickly. Someone else would have ripped out her tongue by now. Luckily for her, he wasn't someone else.

“Harren Hoare and his sons bleed the kingdom dry with their tyranny. Harrenhal isn't even the worst thing he did in the past forty years”, she insisted and Garthon shook his head. “You are talking too much, girl”, he hissed. “You are lucky that Velmont decided to leave after I broke his nose”

She shrugged. “If he would have heard me, I would have put an arrow right between his eyes”, she claimed and was about to say something, when the Harper silenced her. “Enough, Dacey. It's true, Garthon, we are not happy with the current state of the Riverlands. It's not a crime to be unhappy, right?”, he said and his voice got a dangerous tone.

Garthon looked him straight in the eye. “Being unhappy isn't a crime. Being a rebel on the other hand...”, he said and Dacey's startled gaze gave her away. “You are part of the Sons of the Trident, right?”, Garthon added and awaited an answer.

“Who are you, Garthon? Why are you here today?”, Jon the Harper asked and moved his hand under the table. Garthon looked at George, who barely noticeable shook his head.

[Tell them the full truth]

Kersea

She lay on the beach, hearing the waves, watching the first rays of sun after a long, dark night. Kersea always loved watching the sun rising above the Sunset Sea. Her parents' small farmhouse was located on the western coast of the North. On good days, she had been able to see Bear Island. The Sunset Sea was still the same, but nowadays there was rarely a good day. And the remote coast of Bear Island appeared like a distant dream to her.

She had done it again. Killed someone. Tried to enjoy it. And to her horror, she hadn't failed entirely. Up until she heard those screams. Jenna Harking... poor girl. Was she still alive? Kersea could have done something, either helping Wolfius in satisfying his sick desires, or she could have given Jenna a quick death, but... her screams...

Five years ago everything changed for her. She still remembered the day as if it happened yesterday. She had been watching the sunrise with Briar and caught some fish for dinner. Her mother had been a good cook, despite the fact that they had nearly nothing. And when Kersea came home... She remembered the man, standing there over the bodies of her parents, a man two heads taller and twice as broad as she had been. He had given her a completely indifferent

look as she had started to scream. And then he had attacked her. It had been a miracle that she survived. A lot of luck, albeit she wouldn't exactly consider herself lucky. She had killed the man. She had buried her parents. A day later, she had met Clayton and her old life ended. She had to replace the man she killed, the man who had killed her parents. She was a natural talent, as Clayton put it. A born killer. In the last five years, she had lived up to his hopes for her. But there was one thing he had never prepared her for, one thing she never had to be prepared for. Screams. The panicked screams of dying people. A good assassin never heard a single scream in his whole life. And Jenna's screams... they had reminded her of her own. Of Briar's screams as she had been taken away.

Kersea had left Wolfius, but she felt no regret about that. No, she hoped for his death. The outcome of this day had been his fault as well as hers. His aggressive approach had forced her to kill this young guardsman, right? She felt warm tears running down her cheek. She couldn't deny her fault in this mess. Her attempt to control the beast had been foolish and doomed to fail. Perhaps Richard Harking had killed him. Hopefully...

She had to chuckle as she thought this, a completely joyless chuckle. Hope. What a terrible joke. Clayton taught her to kill, but he taught her even more that there was no hope for her. The only hope he left for her was hope for Briar. Kersea closed her eyes as she couldn't stand the sight of the Sunset Sea anymore. As long as the sun was rising for Clayton, there wouldn't be a good day for her.

She looked up to the morning sky. The sun was rising for her. Wiping her tears away, she rose to her feet again. If there would be any justice left in this world, Clayton would pay for every life he forced her to end. But he taught her that there was no justice. There was only one person who would ever pay for tonight and she had no illusions about who it would be. Perhaps her eventual death would be some sort of justice at least. Until then, all she could do was to carry on. And for now she had to get back to the warehouse. She had to face Clayton and she had to tell him about what she did. He would probably hit her. She probably deserved it.

As she walked down the beach, she took one last look at the castle. She understood that their actions in Raylansfair were meant to destabilize the whole town. But there wasn't much to destabilize. Clayton had almost destroyed this town on his own. Killing the old lord and the Maester had been enough for the overly ambitious castellan to rise to power. Perhaps he would be the next target. Alysanne would probably kill him. She was begging Clayton to give her someone to kill for weeks now.

Kersea passed the Sept and not for the first time she asked herself which of the seven hells would be awaiting her after her death. Probably not the seventh. The seventh was reserved for traitors, whereas Kersea's last bit of pride was her loyalty to her sister. If she was lucky, it would be the third. The third was for murderers. She would wait there for Clayton. For Alysanne. For

Wolfius. Maybe her dead friend Raenna would wait for her. The only thing that she regretted was that Briar would be alone. Yes, it was probably the third hell for her.

It didn't take her very long to get back to the warehouse. In the past weeks she had learned to navigate in this bad joke of a town. The only thing that was unusual was the large amount of guards patrolling the streets. But no one suspected a young, unarmed woman to be a trained killer. She knew, they were looking for Wolfius and she hoped they would find him. But deep down, she knew this hope was futile. Men like him, men like Clayton or Butterfly, they would never get what they deserve. Only their pawns, people like Briar, like Raenna, like herself were the ones who would suffer for their actions.

As she entered the warehouse she saw Alysanne sitting at a small table, probably just finishing her breakfast. She was wearing a shirt without sleeves and Kersea saw the ugly scars disfiguring her left arm, signs of the last time one of their missions failed. Blackwater Bay. Half of their group had died on that day, including her friend Raenna. Now there were only Alysanne and Clayton left. And herself of course...

Alysanne raised her head and looked at her with her fair green eyes. They would have been pretty, if the look in them wouldn't be so cold, so broken. "Good morning, puppy", she said far too cheerfully. "What took you so long?" Kersea walked closer towards her and Alysanne's smile vanished, replaced by some sort of concern. "Everything alright?", she asked. Kersea shook her head, holding back the tears again, trying to avoid looking at Alysanne. "What happened?"

This caused her to look up and straight into Alysanne's eyes. A hint of warmth was seen in them. They weren't the almost violet eyes Raenna had, with their soft and soothing look. But it was the kindest gesture anyone had given to Kersea in two months and it almost caused her to sob. Even though she didn't want it, she felt tears running down her cheeks again. And then Alysanne did something unexpected. She gave her a hug.

The gesture surprised Kersea enough to make her accept it. For one moment she rested her head on Alysanne's unburned shoulder, as the other woman clumsily patted her back. "Shhh, puppy. Everything is alright. Things will get brighter", Alysanne whispered and Kersea finally pulled away from her. "What are you doing, Alysanne?", she asked.

The other woman looked at her left hand, freshly bandaged. "I'm comforting you. I have seen this before. That's what friends do, right?", she asked. What she said shook Kersea deeply.

Alysanne was born as a slave, raised in fighting pits, sold to a brothel. At least Kersea had lived a normal life for twenty years and knew what true friendship was. But Alysanne... she was like a child in that matter. Hearing these words, despite the circumstances, despite all that happened to both of them and knowing that Alysanne believed them to be true almost broke her heart.

"What happened to you?", Alysanne asked. Kersea gulped. "The mission failed. Partially. My target is dead. Wolfius' girl probably lives", she answered briefly. Alysanne narrowed her eyes.

“And Wolfius?”, she asked. Again, the attempt to sound genuinely concerned. Sometimes, Kersea thought that Alysanne was a cold sociopath and a bad actor. But the tragedy behind it was that she was a cold sociopath who failed to realize it.

“I don't know. Maybe he's dead”, she answered and almost genuine worry flashed across Alysanne's face. “I hope not”, she whispered and sounded meek for a moment.

“Where's Clayton?”, Kersea asked, looking to the stairs leading upstairs. Alysanne shrugged.

“He left to search for a new location. With all these guardsmen around, he decided to change hideouts for now. He should be back soon”, she answered and looked her in the eyes. “He was very concerned about your absence. We both were” A part of Kersea wanted to believe her. But the rational part of her knew that neither of them were concerned for her. There was only one person left in this world who would be affected by her death.

“Kersea, can I ask you a question?”, Alysanne asked suddenly. She sounded curious, surprisingly playful. “There is something on my mind. Ever since Blackwater. It's about us” Kersea gave her a short nod. “Ask your question, Alysanne”, she answered.

“You know, now that Raenna is dead”, Alysanne said as if she was talking about the weather. The mention of her dead friends name sent a sharp sting of regret through Kersea. “I have asked myself, if... you know... if we could be friends now. Like you and Raenna” Kersea closed her eyes. Not like her and Raenna, no. Never again. Alysanne could never mean as much for her as Raenna did.

“I can understand if you say no. Maybe I just have to try harder. But I want you to be honest with me. Do you think we could be friends? I'd like to have friend. And I guess you could use one too. At least that's something Raenna has told me years ago. So... despite all the things that happened, the things that maybe stand between us... would you consider us friends?”, the woman asked and the look in her eyes was pleading, more befitting to a little girl. Part of Kersea wanted to affirm, if only out of pity. Another part of Kersea wanted to abnegate, also out of pity, but also out of anger for everything that happened. Yes, she could need a friend. They both could. But a friend like Alysanne? It wouldn't be a real friendship. It wouldn't be good. But maybe it would be good enough.

[“Yes”]

Torvin

Prince Harmund's first arrow hit the fleeing man's horse in the leg, sending it to the ground. The man wasted no time and even managed to land on his feet as his horse collapsed below him. He ran with an agility that was incredible for his advanced age, as the hounds reached the horse, starting to tear the dying animal apart. If he would have chosen to sidestep, he would have lived, he would have managed to reach the forest, where the horses would have been

unable to follow. But he chose to run in a straight line towards safety, at least until Rell Vessels managed to hit him in the leg with his arrow. Harmund lowered his bow, turned around and gave Rell a fiendish grin.

“Good shot”, he shouted. “Next time try to hit him in the spine, slightly above his arse. The sounds they make when they realize they can't move their legs anymore...” This statement caused laughter from his underlings, albeit Harlan laughed the loudest. “Priceless”, the younger prince stated.

Harmund descended from his horse and his men did the same. Torvin gave Harlan a short look and the prince answered with a nod, signaling him to join Harmund and his group, who started to gather around the wounded man. Two hounds, large beasts, their hair almost as black as Harmund's, albeit with a temper far less vicious, surrounded him, growling menacingly every time he tried to move. The horses blood stained their snouts. These beasts were absolutely obedient to Harmund, cowering in fear every time he made a sudden movement. Torvin had seen this behaviour in most of the people around him. The only one who seemed to be slightly less afraid was Rell, who seemed to be more like a brother to Harmund than Harlan could ever hope to be.

Torvin looked at Hjalgar, who was walking to his right. Ever since Torvin showed even the slightest sign of sympathy for the boy, he stayed near him, as if he felt a bit safer with Torvin around. Bloody fool! Torvin knew, he couldn't protect Hjalgar from Harmund Hoare's wrath and he wouldn't even try to do it.

Gabin was walking to his left. He was the only member of the hunting party who refused to use a bow, instead preferring to simply ride with them. Like Hjalgar, he had went pale the moment Harmund had spotted the lone rider on his horse. Everything would have been fine if the rider would have stayed calm. But the moment he saw Harmund approaching, he decided to do something very dumb and spur his horse. There were few things that managed to make Harmund Hoare as excited as the prospect of a good hunt, except a good rape perhaps.

“This is sick”, Hjalgar mumbled as he was slowly approaching the circle of Ironborn that had gathered around the wounded man. “This is fucking sick” He looked at Torvin. “What if they decide to hunt us instead?” Torvin shook his head. “They won't”, he answered. “And you should keep your voice down if you want it to remain that way”

Gabin let out a sigh. “Poor idiot”, he mumbled bleakly. “He almost made it. But Rell is a terrific archer” Hjalgar shook his head. “I've seen better”, he admitted. “And I am better” He looked at the Ironborn. “But don't tell them I've said that”, he added hastily. Gabin let out a snorting laugh. “Come on, Hjalgar. You're a good archer? Better than Rell Vessels?”, he asked, but his voice showed pure sarcasm. “Well, I am!”, Hjalgar insisted and Torvin shook his head. What a bloody

fool he was... nobody liked show-offs and Rell Vessels was no difference. Hopefully he wouldn't hear them.

The sound of a blade being drawn caused him to shift his attention to Harmund Hoare again. They were close enough to see the fear in the wounded man's eyes, as the prince pointed his longsword at him. "You tried to run, little fish", Harmund growled. "You should have run faster" He moved his sword down, the tip of the blade scratching the man's chest. "Please...", the man stuttered. "Please, mercy!" Torvin closed his eyes. Not this again...

"Mercy?", Harmund asked. "You dare asking me for mercy?" He raised his blade again and the man flinched and closed his eyes, wimpering something. Instead of killing him with a single blow, the prince kicked him against the chin instead with his heavy boot, causing the man to howl in pain, as he spat several of his teeth on the ground. "Come on...", Harmund whispered. "Ask me again. This is an order"

Tears were flowing out of the man's eyes, just as blood was flowing out of his mouth. "M... Mercy... Mercy!", he cried. Harmund looked at his younger brother, his mouth forming a cold smile. "Harlan", he said with a loud tone, enough to make Harlan flinch. "Yes, brother?", he answered, his voice shifting between fear and excitement. Harmund took a step closer towards him. "You like kicking them while they are down, isn't that right?" Harlan gave him an insecure nod and Harmund pointed at the man. "Only once, brother"

Harlan's face beamed up with joy as he brutally kicked the man in the stomach, causing Hjalgar to turn away from the scenery. Harmund wasn't even noticing it, but Torvin saw that Rell narrowed his eyes. He had heard about Rell Vessels and his talent in uncovering treason. Besides being the son of one of the Iron Fleet's most respected captains and being one of the crown prince's accomplices, he was also part of Harren Hoare's intelligence network. He had to be wary around him.

"I said only once, you fucking inbred!", Harmund shouted and prevented Harlan from kicking the wailing man a second time. "I have a few questions for him and need him alive for that!" He pointed his sword at the man's throat again. "You know who I am?", he asked. The man gave him a slight nod. "Prince Harmund Hoare", he answered with fear in his voice, his speech slurring from the loss of several teeth.

Harmund gave him a pleased nod. "Very good. What is your name, fish?", he demanded to know. The man shivered. "Tomard, my prince. I am a farmhand at Lincoln's farm" The prince raised an eyebrow. "And why exactly is a farmhand riding through this particular night? Haven't they told you to lock your doors and douse your candles? Haven't they told you what happens if you attempt to run from me?" His voice got lower, more threatening. Torvin closed his eyes. This man was dead. This would end badly...

"Lincoln tasked me in...", the man started but stopped. "He... he asked me to..." He closed his eyes, tears running down his face. "Please, my prince, I will tell you, but don't kill me", he pleaded. To Torvin's surprise, Harmund gave him a nod and put his sword away. "Alright. I accept your terms. Tell me everything I want to know and I swear I won't kill you, by the Drowned God and by House Hoare, I swear it"

The man made the problem of trusting Harmund. "Thank you, my prince. I will tell you everything!", he exclaimed. "Lincoln owns a small farm a few miles down the road. He pays you for... for getting spared" Harmund interrupted him by looking at Rell who gave him a nod. "It's true, my prince. This man pays us a nice sum of money so that we don't visit his farm", he explained.

Harmund looked at the old man again, who continued to talk. "I am tasked with finding young girls from around the area, to bring them to the farm. Lincoln keeps them safe until dawn, until you are back at Harrenhal", he stuttered, his eyes widening as Harmund gave him a cold glare. "How many girls have you brought to the farm tonight?", he asked. "Five, your grace. And one girl preferred hiding in the forest" The man's voice shivered in terror. Torvin looked at the forst. So, there was one clever girl and five dumb idiots. Wonderful...

"Please, your grace. One of the girls has a newborn child with her. Lincoln can pay you even more. He will pay you all he has if you spare them!", the man shouted and Harmund visibly resisted the urge to kick him again. "He is paying...", the prince repeated. "He is indeed paying..." He looked at his men and let out a howling laugh. "Unfortunately he is paying only for himself. And this... He thinks he is so clever, giving me money, so that I spare him and his dumb whores. And all this time he refuses to give me what I really want..."

He looked at Harlan. "Harlan!", he shouted and the younger prince flinched. "Yes, Harmund?", he asked. "This fish here told me about a girl who fled into the forest. Do you think we can allow her to escape?" Harlan shook his head. "No, Harmund!", he answered. The prince gave his younger brother a pleased nod. "Clever boy", he complimented him. "Me and Rell will travel to Lincoln's farm. You and your pets will chase after this girl. If you get her, you can do whatever you want with her. And then I allow you to follow me to that fucking farm"

Harlan did a good job in hiding his disappointment, but Torvin saw subtle hints in his face. "But...", he started but was cut off by Harmund's vicious glare. "I understand...", he mumbled. "I will do as you command, brother!" Harmund gave him a nod. "Of course you will", he growled. "And now..."

With brutal force, he pulled the man back on his feet. The man let out a shriek as he was forced to put weight on his wounded leg. "My prince, you promised...", he shouted in panic, but Harmund cut him off. "Indeed, I promised I would never hurt you and I will stay true to my promise. Unfortunately, Rell here never promised anything"

The man let out a scream of terror and started to wet himself. Torvin gave him a disgusted expression. No man should piss himself when faced with his own death. He could at least try to show some dignity.

“One moment, my prince”, Rell said. Harmund gave him a curious look. “You want to say anything?”, the prince growled. “Make it quick, there's a farm filled with beautiful young girls waiting for us!” This statement caused his men to howl in excitement. Rell looked at Hjalgar.

“Indeed, my prince... but you remember this thing here? Hjalgar Holgarsson?”, he asked.

Harmund gave him a nod as if he just remembered that Hjalgar was even present. “I think I see what you mean...”, he said and his fiendish grin reappeared.

“Hjalgar!”, he shouted and the boy shivered. “Come on, you poor excuse for a living being. Have you ever killed a man?” Hjalgar shook his head and Torvin saw the fear in his eyes. Harmund took a step closer towards him. “It's about time...”, he growled. “Kill this man” Hjalgar gave him a panicked stare, clearly uncomfortable with this situation. Torvin let out a sigh. Hjalgar was no killer. He was afraid. This man there, he deserved at least a clean death. Perhaps Torvin could give him this clean death. A single, quick arrow, a matter of seconds. Perhaps Harmund would even be impressed by his initiative. Or he would be enraged. It was hard to tell how he would react.

[Encourage Hjalgar to shoot the man]

Marak

So... this was the big castle of Raylansfair? Marak wasn't impressed. He had seen Harrenhal. He had seen Winterfell and Storm's End. But this was hardly a castle. A decent wall, that unfortunately started to crumble on the seaward side. A single tower, not even particularly high. Maybe a garrison of fifty men at most. He had seen the archive from the distance, a large four-story building. According to Noelle it had a lot of it's space underground. Marak never understood the need to build something underground, where it could look so much more impressive above the ground.

Ser Darren had lead them well so far. The knight wasn't particularly talkative and Marak wasn't too sad about this. The knight had looked into the fire and everytime Marak looked him into his green eyes, he saw flames of the same colour dancing behind them. Right now he was talking to the gatekeeper of this castle, while Noelle simply walked inside of the courtyard, Marak following her like a trained dog. He was almost sure that she had bewitched him. There was no other rational explanation! By the Drowned God, as soon as his business with Noelle would be over he wouldn't stop drinking for weeks! And he would probably try to look for work in the

North. The Northerners weren't too fond of mercenaries, but he once worked for the old Lady Manderly. Of course she had been fond of him...

"Marak!", Noelle's voice interrupted his pleasant thoughts. He looked up and saw a sight even more pleasant than the old Lady Manderly... well, even the wall was a more pleasant sight than Lady Manderly, but still, this sight was remarkably pleasant. A young woman had walked in front of them, probably barely twenty years old. Surprisingly, she was wearing armour. A female guard? Now that was something new... She was tall for a woman, but still barely reached his shoulder. Her light brown hair was falling up to her shoulders, but what caught Marak's gaze was her wonderfully ample chest...

"Tough Guy!", Noelle called him again and Marak quickly raised his stare so that he was able to look the girl in the eyes. They had the same colour as her hair, but looked absolutely furious. "I asked for your name", she hissed. Marak gave her a charming smile and slightly flexed his muscles. Was she impressed? Yeah, she was clearly impressed! Marak grinned at his triumph... "Your. Name. Or else you can wait in the pigpen, where you belong", the woman called him again. Well, perhaps she wasn't that impressed after all. "Greetings, fair lady. My name is Marak", he introduced himself, smiling at her. She narrowed her eyes and Marak noticed the sword strapped to her hip.

"Marak. And Noelle of Braavos, right?", the woman repeated, before looking over Noelle's shoulder. "And who are you?", she asked the approaching Ser Darren. The knight gave her a surprised glare. "Who am I?", he asked. "Girl, I am Ser Darren Tallwood. Fetch me the captain of the guard, or even better, fetch me Ser Harris"

The unfriendly look on the woman's face almost vanished as she heard his name. She slightly bowed her head. "Ser Darren Tallwood!", she exclaimed. "This is... we thought you are dead!" Ser Darren shook his head. "Well, I am not", he answered. "And now be a good girl and fetch me the captain"

This time, the slightly more friendly look on her face vanished. "The captain is standing in front of you", she explained. "Nora Recton, captain of the guard" With these words she nearly bursted with pride and Marak's gaze wandered down her face again. Noelle gave him a slight nudge with her elbow, her uncomfortably warm skin interrupted any pleasant thoughts he could think of.

"Is this some kind of joke? How old are you, girl?", Ser Darren asked a bit impatiently. The look in her eyes got slightly furious now. "Nineteen", she answered, causing Ser Darren and Marak to chuckle. "A nineteen year old girl as the captain of the guard?", the knight asked and almost sounded mocking. But Marak knew, he wasn't mocking her. He was displeased.

"Darren?", a deep voice called from across the courtyard. The man who was approaching them had a few similarities to Marak's father. A few unsettling similarities. He was tall, almost as tall

as Marak and his hair had a similar red colour. And he was at least twice his age. He was wearing an elegant tunic in green and yellow with the sigil of House Raylan on it, a crowned golden book on a field of green. "By the gods, Darren Tallwood!"

The man was approaching Darren, who had a pleased smile on his face, and hugged him brotherly. "We thought you've died months ago!", the man exclaimed, still surprised. Looking past Darren, he noticed Noelle and Marak and gave them a short and polite nod. "Greetings", he said. "My name is Harris Flowers, acting lord of Raylansfair"

Noelle made a curtsy in front of him, while Marak simply grinned at him. That was one of the best things at being a mercenary. Nobody expected manners. "Noelle of Braavos, priestess of R'hllor", the priestess introduced herself. "This is Marak, my bodyguard. We have escorted Ser Darren Tallwood to Raylansfair and now I need to talk to you"

The mention of Rollmop caused Harris to narrow his eyes. "Foreign gods have no place in Raylansfair", he explained calmly. "If it is religion you want to talk about, I have to decline. But if it is something else, I will gladly talk to you"

This seemed to please Noelle and she smiled one of her breathtakingly hot smiles. "I can assure you, the things we need to talk about are very real and very important", she explained. Lord Harris gave her a short nod. "Very well. I can spare a few minutes right now. Why don't you and Ser Darren follow me to my chambers?"

With these words he made a short handwave, commanding Darren, Noelle and Marak after him. The cute guard stayed behind, glaring at Marak. Well, he would convince her of his charm sooner or later!

The short conversation the two knights had while walking towards the single tower also revolved around the guard captain, as far as Marak could tell. "A girl!", Darren hissed angrily. "And so young. I never thought you were a man like that, Harris. Choosing a pretty girl you fancy over someone with actual qualification"

Harris shook his head. "I did not chose Nora because I fancy her, I chose her because she deserved it. She is one of our best fighters. She is loyal to Raylansfair. She is smart and she proved herself in the recent events", he explained.

Ser Darren still seemed to be sceptical, judging from his facial expression. "And what is with Constantine? He's certainly better than some girl who tries to play knight. He should lead the guard", he suggested. Harris gave him a nod. "True, Ser Leonard is the better fighter. But Ser Leonard is not here. He is on his way south together with Ser Lucas, on a mission of grave importance for Raylansfair"

"And when he comes back?", Darren asked. Harris shrugged. "Nora is captain of the guard now. Since today, actually. I can't just dishonour her by taking that post away from her. But Ser Leonard will be appropriately rewarded, I'll make sure of that"

“Still, Harris. A girl. Nineteen years old. She has the looks, I give her that. But what about Ilhan? Where is the Impaler?”, Darren asked. “Surely he would have been a better choice. Fuck, even Bannion, that old drunkard would have been a better choice”

Marak noticed something in the lords face. Sorrow perhaps? Regret? “Ilhan is dead”, he mumbled. “Bannion is also dead, murdered only yesterday” He looked up. “We have to talk about many things, old friend. Your position in this household included” With these words he looked at Marak. “And I'd like to talk without some mercenary watching me” Some mercenary? Now what was that supposed to mean?

Harris and Noelle exchanged a short nod and the priestess gave Marak a nod. “It's okay, Marak. Wait in the courtyard. Nothing will happen to me”, she proclaimed. Marak gave her a reluctant nod. Sure, he was glad to get away from her. Still... something about her made it hard for him to leave. Fucking witchcraft! He turned around like a loyal dog and started to walk down to the courtyard. Now... Noelle was talking with the knight she had bewitched and the lord she wanted to bewitch. And he? What was he supposed to do? His gaze fell upon a group of recruits standing on the courtyard. Oddly enough, there was no master-at-arms to train them. What a fucked-up castle had no master-at-arms? He could show them a few tricks. Could get a bit of training himself. And then he saw something else, something much more pleasant. Nora, the so-called captain of the guard was standing near him. She was ignoring him, but perhaps he should start a nice conversation with her. Marak knew she couldn't resist his charm if he would try to talk to her. And he knew a few activities to fill an otherwise boring afternoon...

[Talk with Nora and be charming]

Lucas

As they entered Archmaester Quent's chambers again, the old man seemed to notice that something was wrong. He looked Lucas in the eyes and shook his head. “What have you done?”, he asked. Before Lucas could answer, Leonard took a step towards the Archmaester and gave him a cold, determined look. “You are hiding something, Archmaester. You are lying. And we don't trust you. We will leave and we will take Dairon with us”, he proclaimed. It appeared to Lucas that Quent had suspected this, as he barely looked up. A joyless smirk formed around the old man's mouth. “You stupid child”, he muttered bleakly. “You stupid, ignorant child. You think this is a matter of sympathy? You think the truth has anything to do with it?” He looked at Dairon, who was standing in a corner. The boy had an intimidated look on his face. “You want to fight for the future of your city, against the whole world if you have to. You look like men, but you are nothing more than little boys, playing knights. You think your enemy will play with the same rules” He looked at Lucas again. “You are wrong”, he hissed. “And you are doing a terrible mistake”

"We're taking the risk, Archmaester", Lucas answered. "Who knows what your plans for Dairon are? We won't keep him here and we certainly won't work with you anymore. Tomorrow we're on our way back to Raylansfair" This time, Quent slightly chuckled. "Tomorrow, Ser Lucas, you will be dead" With these words, he looked at Dairon. "If, by any chance, you survive this madness, return to the Citadel. But don't come to my quarters. It's a small miracle you were able to enter them undetected the first time. Enter the Mage's tower. It's the smallest tower of the citadel, but it's roof is alloyed with valyrian steel. Go to Archmaester Wulvren. He can keep you safe", he explained and looked at Lucas again. "Better than these two at least. Wulvren is a bit eccentric, but he's the only man here whom I would fully trust"

"Come on, Dairon. We're done here", Leonard said and with a hanging head, the boy started to walk towards them. "I'm sorry, Archmaester", he mumbled. "But I know them and I trust them" Quent narrowed his eyes as he looked from Lucas to Leonard. "You damnable idiots", he growled.

The Archmaester raised from his chair and his stare got slightly angry. "I took tremendous personal risks for my brother's sake. I was honest to you in a city full of liars. I was your ally in a city that wants to see you dead. And you reject my help" He shook his head. "Get out", he growled. "Get out and don't come back!"

The sudden fury in his voice was enough to stun Lucas for a moment. Leonard seemed to be baffled too, but his anger seemed to help him to regain composure quickly. "We will", he said and turned to the door. "Flowers, Dairon, come on. We've wasted enough time"

Lucas gave Quent a final look. The old man looked absolutely furious, but there was something else. Sadness? Anticipation? The Archmaester was hard to read. Trusting him was at least as much a risk as not trusting him. "Farewell, Archmaester", he said, before stepping out of the room. Dairon followed, albeit a bit slower and visibly uneasy about the whole situation.

Leonard was waiting for him near the stairs. "You made the right decision, Flowers", he said.

"We made the right decision" As they were walking down the stairs of the Historian's tower, Lucas looked out of the small windows that were built into the wall at certain points. The sun was already vanishing, a dim, red light illuminated the streets of Oldtown. "Tomorrow we're going to talk to Mullendore", he decided and Leonard let out a sigh. "I still think it's a mistake to get near this dog. Don't tell him anything about Dairon!", he warned him. Lucas shook his head. "I won't. But I think Maester Quent was right about one thing. This city is dangerous and I don't know if we can make it out of here without help. I don't like working with Mullendore, but if it helps us in bringing Dairon and Lord Raylan's last will out of here and to the king, he is necessary"

They stopped talking as they stepped to the large entrance hall of the tower. Even now, plenty of novices and acolytes were passing through it. Most of them had hostile glares on their faces.

And as they stepped out of the tower and breathed the cold evening air, Lucas was glad to leave this place behind him. "And now? What are we going to do now", Dairon asked. Leonard gave him a small pat on the back. "Now we will go back to our little tavern, we'll get you a cold beer and a warm bed. And tomorrow, we will talk to Mullendore, so that we can leave this city behind" He sounded hopeful as he said this. Still, as they walked down the alleys of Oldtown, Lucas knew that Leonard was questioning their decision as well. Quent had an agenda of his own, it was clear to see. But this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps there was no right choice here...

They arrived at the Blind Helmsman inn a few minutes later. Judging from the noise, it was already crowded. Dairon gave Lucas a slightly sceptical look. The boy rarely spoke, something Lucas already noticed from his time back in Raylansfair. "You want to tell me I'm safe in there?", he asked. Leonard nodded enthusiastically. "Nobody in this city is truly honest, but these people in here are good men nonetheless. Soldiers, guards, a couple of mercenaries. They are not honest, but they are straightforward and that is better than all the knives this snake Quent was hiding", he explained. Dairon still seemed to be doubtful. "I trusted Quent", he mumbled. "I mean, he is nothing like Eaton, but he is still his brother after all. Perhaps we should have worked with him" Leonard let out a small chuckle. "That's because you know nothing", he grinned. "It's good that we are away from that guy. A Maester has no family, remember? And Quent has a lot of bitterness inside of him. We'll manage to keep you safe" Lucas knew, Leonard tried to reassure Dairon, but it also sounded as if he wanted to reassure himself. As they entered the tavern, Lucas realized that it was very crowded indeed. Nonetheless, he noticed Lunett sitting at a free table. After a day like that, she was a sight for sore eyes and Lucas had to smile as he saw her. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Leonard grinning at him, but it did not matter to him in this moment. He approached the table and Lunett finally noticed them. She raised her hand and beckoned them to come over to her.

"Lucas! Leonard!", she exclaimed joyfully. "You're back and..." Her gaze fell on Dairon and in a single moment all the tension of the past hours fell off her face, replaced by a genuine smile. "And you must be Dairon!", she exclaimed, jumping up from her chair. Lucas knew that she had suffered from the thought that her behaviour endangered Dairon and seeing her exuberant joy was truly refreshing. Before Dairon could say anything, Lunett hugged him. Lucas smile turned into a grin as he saw the boys face getting red.

"Ah, yes...", he stuttered. "M... My na... I'm Dairon" Lunett sat back down on her chair, still grinning from ear to ear. "And this is Lunett Kawl", Lucas explained. "She accompanied us to Oldtown" He looked at Leonard, before adding "She helped us a lot"

This caused Leonard to raise an eyebrow, while Lunett looked similarly baffled. But both stayed silent as Dairon respectfully bowed his head. "I am thankful m'lady", he mumbled before sitting down, his face still red like a tomato. "But as I said, I don't believe I was in danger with Archmaester Quent"

"Perhaps not you", Leonard said slowly. "I don't think the Historian is a man for physical violence. But in the long run his plans can't be good for Raylansfair. It's a good thing we got you and Lord Raylan's last will away from him" He leant backwards on his chair and raised his hand, signalling the barmaid, a middle-aged woman with a plump face and short brown hair, to come over. "Bring us four jugs of ale", he ordered her. "I'm paying" With these words he leant forward again, looking at Lucas, Lunett and Dairon with a stern expression on his face. "We have a lot to talk about", he explained.

Lucas gave him a short nod "I think Mullendore said the truth when he revealed that this Butterfly is searching for Dairon", he stated and saw the boy shivering. "We have to leave the city tomorrow, waiting any longer would be foolish, but we still have to expect trouble"

Leonard closed his eyes for a moment. "And you think Maron Mullendore is our best bet when it comes to help, right?", he asked. "You don't intend to leave after claiming that damned letter" He let out a sigh. "I don't like this, Flowers. I really don't like this. Maron Mullendore is Lord Hightowers little pet. If he suspects that we know more about Dairon, he will arrest us and he will question us very thoroughly. Do you think he's a risk worth taking?"

Lucas paused for a moment, but before he could answer, Dairon interjected. "For what it's worth, I was born in Oldtown and I have lived her for thirteen years", he revealed. "I have heard a lot of good things about Mullendore. He's fair, as long as you stand on his side of the law" This caused Leonard to chuckle. "And what is 'his side of the law' exactly? The side that pays the most?", he exclaimed and looked up as the barmaid returned, serving each of them a jug of ale. Dairon shook his head quite furiously. "No!", he explained. "Maron Mullendore is different. He opposes crime and corruption. Perhaps he takes it too far with his punishment, but as long as you abide the law he is a good man" Leonard took a deep gulp from his ale and grinned. "A good man in Oldtown...", he chuckled and shook his head. "I trust him more than Quent, but only because he does not seem to be intelligent enough for treachery" He looked at Lucas. "You are sure about working with him? Do you think this is the best idea?"

Lucas shrugged. "I don't think we have a lot of alternatives. Quent isn't an option anymore. Trustworthy or not, we have angered him. There is Butterflies enemy, this so-called Burned Man, but I don't want to work with criminals just to get out of this city again", he explained. "And Mullendore is at least a man who upholds the law instead of breaking it"

Leonard still didn't seem to be entirely convinced. "And what about bending the law? People in his position tend to do that a lot", he said, before letting out a sigh. "But I see your point. I'm

trusting you, Flowers. I'm trusting you to do the right decision here. It can't hurt to get that damned letter. And who knows, perhaps a closer alliance with Mullendore is the best thing. Perhaps I am too distrustful" He took another sip from his ale and Lucas did the same. He noticed that Dairon had barely touched his jug, simply staring at it, apparently unsure what to do. "Everything alright, Dairon?", he asked kindly.

The boy shook his head and closed his eyes. "No, it's... I... Two weeks ago, everything had been so different. Maester Eaton was still alive, Lord Robert was still alive. I had been nothing more than a Maester's acolyte. Now I am in a place I never wanted to return to and I am hunted by a ruthless criminal. And for what? Just because I know about Lord Robert's last will? Is it so important? Why does Butterfly want this last will?", he stuttered.

This question took Lucas by surprise and he exchanged looks with Leonard. "That is actually a very good question", he mumbled. "Mullendore revealed that Butterfly wants you and the will, likely for the same reasons. But why?" He saw Dairon shivering. "I... am afraid", the boy mumbled. "This city always had problems. But the problems it had in my childhood are nothing compared to Butterfly. The criminals who tormented this city years ago weren't that bad compared to him. Quent told me about... the things he does with his victims... it's like something out of a nightmare" He looked up and seemed to be paler than before "I don't want to be targeted by him"

Before Lucas could say anything, Lunett reached across the table and grabbed Dairon's hand. The boy shivered, as she gently patted him on the back of his hand. "Easy, Dairon. He may target you, but he won't get you. We'll make sure of that. Ser Lucas and Ser Leonard will protect you and I will do my part to keep you safe", she comforted him and looked at Lucas. "We all do what's necessary to get you back home, right?"

Lucas gave her a nod and Lunett answered with a stunning smile. "We will", he said and for a moment he was unable to look away, as he stared deeply into Lunett's dark blue eyes. For a moment, this was all that mattered. At least until Leonard let out a snorting laugh. "Seven Heavens, get a room you two, will ya?", he exclaimed, trying to contain his laughter. Lunett blushed and Lucas was sure he did as well.

Leonard slightly shook his head. "You're adorable", he grinned and Lucas gave him an angry glare. "Time to change the topic", Leonard proclaimed immediately, with a big smirk on his face. "Dairon, you never mentioned that you were born in Oldtown"

Dairon took an unenthusiastic sip of his beer, grimacing as he tasted the bitter ale. "It's nothing I talk about very often", he mumbled. "My mother was a potter, living in a small back alley not far from here. I've never met my father, but my mother told me he was a knight, or at least he called himself a knight" He looked up. "She never outright told me, but she implied a lot of things I only

understood years after her death. My father, he... it wasn't consensual" He looked down again, apparently ashamed, leaving Lucas at a loss for words.

"You said your father was a knight", he said after a short moment of silence. "No true knight would do that" Dairon gave him a glare, a mixture between anger and surprise. "I grew up in Oldtown, Ser Lucas. Maybe I haven't seen as much of the world as you have, but the things I saw taught me one thing. There are no true knights. Perhaps there have been, in the Age of Heros, thousands of years ago. But today, no knight is true"

Before Lucas could protest, Dairon continued. "That doesn't mean there aren't good knights.

You are good. Ser Leonard is good. But a true knight is without flaws. Are you without flaws?"

Leonard shook his head. "Nobody is. If that's what you see as a true knight, then you are right. If a true knight has to be without flaws, there is none. And there never has been"

"That's a pretty cynical view on knighthood", Lucas protested, but Dairon shook his head. "Just because no knight is true doesn't mean all of them are false. There are good knights and bad knights and good knights who do bad things and bad knights who do good things. And then there are bad knights who do bad things. Try to live a few years in this city, Ser Lucas, and you will see that it's full of the latter" He took another deep gulp from his ale, grimaced again and put his jug down, before raising from his chair. "It has been a long day...", he mumbled. "I would like to go to sleep"

As Leonard heard this, he put up a smile "Ah yes. I've made preparations in the morning. You'll sleep in my room, it's safer that way. You get the bed, I'm no stranger to sleep on the floor", he explained and Dairon gave him a reluctant nod. "If... if you insist", he mumbled. "I mean, are you sure? I don't want to be a burden!" Leonard shook his head and his smile vanished. "Boy, if you don't want to be a burden you should have stayed in Raylansfair", he growled, causing Dairon to avoid any eye contact

He made an attempt to stand up, but Lunett was faster, still blushed from Leonard's earlier comment, albeit Lucas noticed a light smile on her face. "I'll go to sleep too. I can bring you to your room", she proclaimed. Lucas tried to suppress the disappointment in his face, but he had no doubt that Leonard caught it and would mock him for it.

"Goodnight, Ser Leonard", Lunett said with a short bow. "Try not to be a pain in the ass, please"

This caused Leonard's smile to vanish, but Lucas had a hard time containing his laughter.

Lunett looked at him and for a moment it appeared as if she wanted to say something. Instead she simply smiled at him before turning around, walking towards the stairs that lead upstairs.

Dairon took a deep bow in front of the knights. "I want to thank you", he mumbled. "For doing this. I know you don't do it for me, but still... if I make it out of here alive, I will do it because of you. And I can never repay this debt. I never meant to insult you. You are good men, both of you"

Before Lucas and Leonard could answer anything, Dairon turned around, going after Lunett. Surprisingly, Leonard wasn't smirking as he was looking from Lunett back to Lucas. "Well, this talk just got a lot darker than I intended. All I wanted to talk about was the psychopath out there who is probably hunting us", he said and his smirk returned. "And now I have to deal with two lovebirds and a far too cynical acolyte in the most fucked up city in all of Westeros"

This caused Lucas to look up. "What are you implying?", he growled. Leonard leant forward and grinned at him. "Oh, nothing, you know? Dairon is a nice boy", he grinned. "And Lunett..." Before he could continue, Lucas cut him off. "No", he hissed and raised from his chair. "I won't take your mockery now. I mean, what do you want to hear from me? Yes, I like her. Yes, I know this is not the best time or the best place for that. I know I am foolish. That's what you want to say, right?", he growled angrily.

To his surprise, Leonard shook his head. "Absolutely not, Flowers", he answered. "I'm not a man who scolds others for mistakes he made himself. Lunett is a wonderful young woman and you are... well, you are sometimes not a complete idiot" This caused Lucas to roll with his eyes. It was a long day and he had no nerves for Leonard now. "I guess I'm just leaving. If you have to be an ass, be alone", he moaned

"Flowers, wait!", Leonard exclaimed in a loud voice, causing Lucas to stop. "I don't mean to insult you, okay! There is nothing wrong with liking the innkeeper's daughter. Especially if she likes you too", he said. "Please, sit down. There's one more thing I'd like to talk about. Nothing about Lunett. Nothing about Mullendore or Hightower. It's important"

The urgent tone in his voice caused Lucas to stop. He let out a sigh. "One word about me and Lunett or how foolish I am and I'm gone", he warned him before sitting back down. Leonard raised his hands. "Sorry for offending you, Lady Flowers", he chuckled. "Nothing about that, I promise"

He leant forward, his smile vanishing. "When we talked to the Historian, he said a lot of things I don't believe. But some of the things he said were true. Things about me I never wanted a snake like him to know. And because of that I have to ask, about the things he said to you. About your father"

Lucas slightly rolled with his eyes. Talking about this always filled him with anger. But he could see the curiosity in Leonard's face. And after what Quent said, he didn't want the other knight to get a wrong opinion about him. "You want to know if what Quent said is true, right? If I really poisoned my father. You want to know if you are travelling with someone capable of kinslaying"

Leonard almost looked a bit guilty as he gave him a nod. "I didn't want to say it like that. Kinslaying is an ugly word", he mumbled. "No offense, but I have to know it. During our travels, I

got a good opinion about you. I don't think you're capable of such a thing. But Quent... he knew things about me, so..."

Lucas interrupted him. "It's okay, Len", he said bleakly, even though he felt slightly angry that he would even imply such a thing. Kinslaying, one of the first crimes a mortal could commit. Yet, he knew someone who would be capable of such a thing. He couldn't exactly blame Leonard.

"You know I was born in Darkdell, as the bastard son of Lord Leo Vyrwel. My father and his wife, Lady Selyse of House Fossoway, already had four children, but he was insatiable in his lust.

And so he seduced a courtier and fathered a bastard son", he explained. Leonard gave him a nod. "So far it's nothing new for me", he said. "I met Lord Leo once a few years ago, while travelling to Darkdell. He seemed to be very strict, but honourable"

"Not honourable enough to avoid fathering a bastard", Lucas interjected. "Trust me, I know my father better than you could ever do. I can't say a lot of good things about him, but he raised me alongside my older siblings. Of course I always knew that I was a bastard and of course people despised me for it, but it wasn't a bad life. I was especially close to my oldest brother, Petyr.

Lady Selyse hated me of course. She always hated me and nothing I did could change her opinion", he explained. Leonard gave him a short nod. "I can understand her", he said and got a glare from Lucas. "No offense!", he added quickly. "But I guess it was hard for her as well, always having proof of her husbands infidelity around"

This time, Lucas had to nod in agreement. "I think so", he mumbled. "But I was a boy back then, not a man. I saw it differently and I protested harshly, probably too harshly. My father had no other choice but to side with his wife here. And so I was sent away, to squire for Lord Tarly's brother. In time, I was knighted myself and roamed the land. I spent a year in Essos, travelling the Free Cities together with John Gutten and his mercenaries. I fought in battles, I slew enemies and I won gold and glory"

He paused for a moment and closed his eyes. Now he came to the uncomfortable part of his story. "A year ago, I returned to Darkdell as a grown man. My siblings were overjoyed, especially Petyr. Or at least that's what I thought. He had grown into man too and he had changed more than I was able to see. Lady Selyse still hated me and urged my father to send me away again. And so he complied. The night before I was supposed to leave, I uncovered something, an attempt on my father's life"

He saw how Leonard narrowed his eyes, listening carefully. His voice shivered as he continued. "Petyr, my brother, attempted to poison my father to claim House Vyrwel for himself. I stopped him and confronted him about it. I revealed his plans to my father. And only then I realized that while Petyr failed in poisoning his body, he succeeded in poisoning his mind. He convinced my father that I had planned to poison him and Lady Selyse. He twisted the truth and urged my father to execute me. My father believed him, believed every rotten lie, but instead of executing

me, he simply banished me and disgraced my name by making my supposed treachery public. No lord in the Reach wanted to deal with me anymore. No lord except the one man who was interested in the truth. Lord Raylan was kind to me when I needed it the most and I...", he said and had to stop as his voice cracked.

"What a fucking weasel", Leonard mumbled. "Your brother Petyr, I mean. He sounds like someone who deserves all of the Seven Hells" Lucas gave him a nod. "He does", he agreed. "Even though I want to forgive him for what he did, I just can't. I trusted him and he repaid my trust with treachery"

"Sounds familiar", Leonard answered and took a deep gulp from his ale. As he put his jug down, Lucas noticed that he had emptied it. "You think Dairon's going to be angry if I drink his ale too?", Leonard asked. Lucas shook his head. "He didn't seem too amazed by it", he mumbled, looking at his own ale. "And I'm paying, after all", Leonard added, grabbing the jug and starting to drink from it. "What I want to tell you now is something I can't tell you while being entirely sober"

Lucas gave him a curious look. "It's about what Quent said, right? He said something about a whore trying to kill you" Leonard put down his jug and sighed. "Yes", he answered. "But it's a bit more complicated than that. Still, the fact that Quent knew something about this made me distrust him more than anything else. I've told only a few people about this and this snake certainly wasn't among them. But he knew it and that made me think... about you..."

He paused for a moment, taking a deep gulp from his ale, putting down an empty jug. "Are you familiar with what I did before I entered Lord Raylan's service?", he asked. Lucas shook his head. "Can't say I do. Should I?", he answered. Leonard let out a sigh. "Maybe. Then again, I never had much business with Darkdell. I was in service of several lords after I was knighted and served as a high-ranking guard in several households, Lord Raylan's included. One of these lords was Tytos Rowan, the lord of Goldengrove. In his service, I met a man, Marcus Whitehead. I thought that we had a lot in common and we became good friends. In Lord Rowan's service we slew bandits and one day we even foiled an attempt on his life. Lord Rowan, Marcus and me were out for a hunt, when a man attacked him. He managed to wound Lord Rowan with a crossbow, before I could engage him in single combat"

He paused for a moment and moved his finger across the scar over his eye. "I received a rather permanent reminder of this encounter, but I managed to kill the assassin with Marcus' help. Up to this day I haven't found out who hired him, albeit I have a suspicion", he mumbled, grabbing Lunett's jug of ale. The girl had barely taken a sip of it before leaving the room and Leonard seemed to be thankful for this.

"We brought Lord Rowan back to Goldengrove, where he rewarded us with a pretty huge sum of money. I was twenty years old at the time and you can probably imagine how foolish I was at the

time”, he explained and the hint of a smirk got visible on his face. “A bit like you, Flowers” His smirk vanished before Lucas could answer anything. “Marcus told me that he knew exactly the right way to celebrate. He was two years older than me and I have to admit I looked up to him a bit, even though I was the better fighter and had the richer family. But Marcus... he always had this way to make people trust him and like him”

Leonard let out an audible sigh. “He brought me to this remote area at the shores of Red Lake and told me to enjoy the evening, before leaving me alone. Wandering around, I soon found a tent, not one of these small dirty things the Dothraki live in, but a tent worthy of a king. And out of it stepped a woman who was beautiful enough to be a queen”, he explained and his eyes got a dreamy stare for a short moment. “Her name was Celestial Sunder and she was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. We spent the night together and...”, he said and paused for a moment. “I'm sparing you the details, okay? I learned that she was a whore, quite famous in the area. 'Red Lady', they called her for the red dress she was wearing. In that moment, nothing of it mattered. I guess for me it was love at first sight”

This caused Lucas to smirk at him. “Really, Leonard? You fell in love with a whore?” His smirk vanished as he noticed that Leonard looked deadly serious. “I did, Flowers”, he growled. “And it was a fucking mistake. As soon as we were... done, I wanted to get some wine. She surprised me by grabbing my own sword and threatening me with it. And then she called out for Marcus...” Leonard paused and Lucas saw helpless anger in his face. “It turned out that Celestial was his lover and this was their trick. The area was very remote, not entirely harmless. One out of ten customers was murdered by them, his possessions added to their ever growing fortune. Marcus had always been envious of my families wealth. And he saw me as a rival in Lord Rowan's favour. With me gone, he would have become Rowan's captain of the guard. But just killing me would have been too easy for him...”

He paused for a moment, finishing the next jug of ale, staring at the empty jug with sadness in his eyes. “So he beat me nearly into unconsciousness, just enough to stop any resistance from me. Then he tied me to a small boat and caused it to float to the middle of the lake. And then he shot a flaming arrow that was supposed to cause my death by fire. Luckily he was never a very good shot and managed to hit a spot near my hands. The fire burned the rope, as well as my arms, but I managed to jump into the water before any lasting damage was done. Still, I was more dead than alive when I managed to swim to the shore”

He paused again. “I wandered around the area for hours, naked, humiliated, freezing. My hands were burnt and it took me month until they were fully healed again. But even worse, my pride was hurt. I was betrayed by my best friend and the first woman I've truly loved. I was close to just giving up, laying down on the ground and waiting for death to claim me. But I refused to give up. I found a farmhouse after walking for nearly a whole day. The farmer and his family nursed

me back to health and up to this day I owe them my life for it", he explained and closed his eyes for a moment.

"I returned to Goldengrove as soon as my wounds were healed. Lord Rowan had already deduced that Marcus was behind my disappearance, but he failed to capture him. He and Celestial were smart enough to escape from Goldengrove. Up to this day, they are still somewhere out there", Leonard mumbled and Lucas watched his hands shaking in anger. "I left Lord Rowan's service soon afterwards. Goldengrove was full of painful memories. After a few years of travelling, I finally entered Lord Raylan's service again. He had always been fond of me and offered me a place in his household, a place I gladly accepted"

Lucas gave him an understanding nod. "That's why you're so distrustful of strangers", he said and Leonard let out a sigh. "I never mean to be like this. It's just natural for me. I just don't trust anyone immediately. And if they are even remotely shady, like Quent... so far it's been for the better not to trust anyone here"

"But you trust me?", Lucas asked. Leonard nodded in agreement. "Aye", he answered. "I trust you, Lucas. You've proven yourself in my eyes. Whatever you say about what happened with your father, I believe you. Whatever plan you think is the best in this whole mess here, I trust that you do what you think is for the best"

He raised from his chair. "Talking about this fucking mess made me tired", he mumbled. "You mind if I go to my room? Sleeping on the floor, while that boy gets my bed sure sounds more fun than talking about Marcus and Celestial" Lucas shook his head and raised from his chair. "I'll do the same", he answered. "Tomorrow will be a long day"

Together, the two knights climbed the stairs to the inn's second floor, where the bedrooms were located. Leonard walked straightly towards his room directly next to Lucas', but stopped as he saw Lucas stopping. "Anything the matter, Flowers?", he asked. Lucas looked at one of the doors and for a moment he was unsure if he should knock or not. He liked Lunett, Leonard was right. But it was late. He probably should leave her alone...

"Do it, Flowers", Leonard's voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked up and saw that Leonard had his usual grin on his face. "I know what you're thinking about and I say you should do it" He let out a small laugh. "Oh, come on Flowers. Don't give me that face!"

He took a few steps closer towards Lucas. "What you're going to do now is, you're going to knock at her door and you'll talk with her about what you feel. The girl likes you and you like her. A blind man could see it", he urged him. Lucas gave him a surprised look. "What? Now? I mean, that's not the right time for it, don't you agree?", he stuttered.

Leonard shook his head. "Now is the only good moment to do it. You said it yourself, we're leaving this city tomorrow. If things go well, we're leaving it alive. Afterwards, we have a few days on the road, where you two won't have any personal time. And when we bring her back to

her father's inn, we're going to be lucky if that ox of an innkeeper won't attack us on sight. Today's the best moment to do that", he explained. "And trust me, you will regret it if you never even talk to her about it. Worst thing that could happen is that she's just as shy as you are and won't admit to anything. Trust me, Flowers, it'll be worth it"

All of a sudden, Leonard started to chuckle and Lucas noticed that his face had turned red. "Flowers, you're adorable", Leonard said with a grin. "And now knock on her door or I'll have to force you to do it"

Lucas closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He looked back at Leonard who pointed at the door and slightly moved his wrist, symbolizing a knocking movement. And then he forced himself to knock at the door in front of him. As he looked back to Leonard, he saw that the knight had opened the door to his own room and gave him a short bow. "Thank me later, Flowers", he grinned. "Have a good night"

Shuffling footsteps indicated that Lunett was walking towards the door. Lucas felt his heart beating up to his throat. Fucking Len! May the Stranger take him! Why had he done it? Lucas closed his eyes again, forcing himself to calm down a bit. She wasn't the first girl he was about to confess feelings to. But as the bastard of Vyrwel he had generally been shunned by the female population of Darkdell. And women in the Free Cities were a bit more... easy-going. At least one girl had made the first move before he even expressed any interest, something that would be unthinkable for a Westerosi woman. When it came to women like Lunett, women he genuinely liked, he was at a loss for words.

"Yes?", Lunett said through the closed door. "Who is it?" Lucas took another deep breath before answering. "It's Lucas. Can we..." Before he was able to finish the door, she had ripped the door open. "Talk", he finished his sentence, looking at her in surprise. From the keen look on her face it was clear that Lunett hadn't slept yet. But she had already loosened the short bun she wore her hair in and she wore a far lighter dress, something to wear in bed. Lucas forced himself not to look at her exposed skin. Apparently she noticed how fast she had opened the door and a shy smile formed on her lips. "Yes...", she mumbled. "Of course! Please, come in"

With these words, she made way for him to enter her room. It was a small and dark room, albeit she had a candle lit. Besides her bed and a small chair there was nothing to sit down and she immediately gave him a handwave, signaling him to sit down on the bed. "My apologies for how dark it is. "I wanted to go to sleep in a moment", she said and let out a nervous chuckle. "Just caught me in the right moment. What is it you want to talk about?"

Lucas forced himself to take another deep breath, ignoring his wildly thumping heart. "Us", he simply answered and cursed himself for how weak his voice sounded. Her face on the other hand lit up for a moment, albeit she tried her best to hide it. "Us?", she asked surprised. "What is... what would there... is there anything not right?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, no, everything is good between us. It's just...", he stuttered, looking at her deep blue eyes. For a moment, he almost lost himself in them. "Seven Hells, I'm sorry Lunett. Len basically forced me to do it. I never wanted to bother you"

He attempted to stand up, but was stopped as Lunett quickly grabbed his arm. "No!", she exclaimed and immediately let go of his hand again. "I mean...", she stuttered. "You're not bothering! What is wrong?"

Lucas closed his eyes again, taking all his courage together, before answering. "Nothing is wrong. It's just... I...", he stuttered and paused for a moment. Her smile was breathtaking and she sat down on the bed, right next to him. "Yes?", she asked almost toneless. Lucas gulped, before moving closer to her, leaning into kiss her. As soon his lips touched hers, she pulled away, her face getting bright red.

"I...", she stuttered. "I didn't know..." Lucas let out a short embarrassed cough. "I am sorry Lunett. I shouldn't have done that...", he mumbled. She shook her head. "No. That's not..." And then a smile formed on her face as she moved forward, kissing him again, this time with passion. For a short moment, time seemed to stop for Lucas.

"I feel the same", she said. "I... I like you a lot. You have been kind for me, you supported me. You took me with you when I asked you for it. When Ser Leonard was angry at me, you weren't, even though I lied to you" She leaned in for another kiss, but in the last moment she pulled him in for a hug instead. "I mean, how couldn't I start to like you?", she whispered in his ear. "And after all I did, you're still liking me?"

"I do", Lucas answered and gave her another kiss. She wasn't the first girl he had kissed, but she was different from the others, from the way she made his heart beat faster just by looking at him, to the way she made him smile whenever she smiled. Seven blessings to Leonard for forcing him to do this! But now that he had confessed to her... he didn't want to push his luck. There was a long day coming and he felt tired from all that happened today. The Historian, Dairon, Leonard, but most importantly, this moment right now. Never before in all his life had he felt this sort of happiness. The joy he felt while being knighted was nothing compared to the feeling of holding Lunett in his arms. Everything that happened in the last weeks was worth it, as it lead to this moment. "I... I am glad... I am glad that we...", he said. "I should probably get some rest now. Tomorrow will be a long day, hopefully the last we have in this city. We both should get some rest. We should leave it here, we should continue our talks tomorrow"

He raised and she gave him a bright smile. "Yes...", she mumbled. "We should" She raised from the bed and gave him a hug. "Or you could stay for a little longer. Just a little bit...", she whispered in his ear and Lucas started to grin. There was nothing he wanted more in this moment. But there was one thing that stopped him, one bad thought that remained. Even if they would all survive this, he would bring her back to her fathers inn. He would hardly ever see her

again. But if he would stay now, if he would spend the night with her if he would... he would dishonour her by never seeing her again. In the worst case he would even father a bastard, another Flowers born out of passion, despised by gods and men... could he do this to her?

[Stay]

Maya

She thought about it for a short moment. On the one hand, she was pretty sure that Irving was a mediocre archer at best. On the other hand, she wasn't that good herself, especially at night. And if she would forbid him taking the bow, he would complain about it for hours. Of course, he would find something to complain either way. But she had to take her chances here.

"Okay, you take the bow", she ordered Irving. His face dropped for a moment. "Really?", he said in a baffled tone "I mean, I'm not complaining, but have you just agreed with me?" Maya let out an annoyed sigh. "You're even complaining when I agree with you, aren't you?", she sighed. Irving quickly shook his head. "I'm not complaining", he repeated himself, even though it was a clear lie. "Do you even listen to me?"

This time, Maya forced herself to smile at him. "I dearly regret it", she answered. Irving only narrowed his eyes as he heard this and shook his head, but stayed silent. He carefully picked up Gregar's bow and gave the sleeping man a worried look. "If he wakes up and notices that I took his bow...", he mumbled. "Do you think he might be more dangerous to me than Ser Aldrik's beast?"

Maya started to smirk as she thought about this. "Irving, I think everything is more dangerous to you than Ser Aldrik's wolf", she grinned. "After all, it would have to touch you with it's mouth to be dangerous to you. I think it's too intelligent for that"

Irving just looked at her for one moment, before shaking his head and grabbing a quiver full of arrows. "You really like making fun of me, do you?", he moaned. Maya shrugged. "You gotta have some uses after all", she smiled.

"Eh, whatever", Irving growled. "Let's just go inside of that dark forest at night, what could possibly go wrong? I can't wait getting murdered" Maya suppressed a bright laughter, so that she wouldn't wake Gregar and Ser Aldrik up. Sometimes she suspected that Irving was like this on purpose. "Irving, the only things that will murder you inside of this forest are Grumkins and Snarks", she grinned. "Besides, if you're afraid, why are you even coming with me?"

Irving took a suspicious look at Gregar. "Because I really don't want to get eaten", he hissed. "Isn't that clear? This beast might be too clever to eat me, but what about Gregar?" Maya rolled with her eyes. "Yeah, I think Gregar can't wait to make soup out of you", she mumbled. Irving looked at her as if she had lost her mind, but this time she caught him smirking "I don't think

Gregar knows what soup is", he said. "He'd probably eat me raw, like the mice his goddamn bird prefers"

This thought finally caused Maya to laugh out loudly, while Irving simply smirked. She immediately stopped laughing though, as Gregar groaned in his sleep and slightly moved. Not wanting to wake him up, she tried her best to suppress her laughter. "Irving, enough!", she grinned. "Let's just check this light out and then we can go back to sleep" The thought of the monstrous Orson Royce in her dream flashed through her mind and her face dropped. "Well... you can, at least", she added. "I'll stay guard. Can't risk having you sleep through your shift again"

"Now that was the most intelligent thing I've heard you saying in a while, Ambassador", Irving said with a grin. "Told you it wasn't my fault that I've fallen asleep" Maya let out a sigh and decided to remain quiet. She walked towards the forest, Irving followed her closely. "Just... don't get me killed, okay", he whispered. "You won't get killed, Irving", Maya said and rolled her eyes. "Promise it!", he urged, prompting Maya to turn around, fast enough for him to nearly walk into her. "I promise", she hissed, not even trying to hide her annoyance "I promise that I will kill you myself if I hear even the hint of a word coming from you until we reach the forest" The rest of the way, Irving stayed silent. Maya was glad that she walked in front of him, so that he couldn't see her smiling.

"See anything?", she asked as they arrived at the forest. Despite the darkness, she saw Irving narrowing his eyes. "It's hard to tell... maybe we should have brought a... oh right, I forgot, someone let the fire die by picking the wrong guard for the night", he moaned. "Anyway, I think it's that way" He started to lead, while Maya followed, actively resisting the urge to strangle him. The forest was dark, darker than the forests back home. While the kingdom of the Mountain and Vale wasn't as forested as the Reach was, it wasn't even nearly as bleak as travellers usually depicted it. But it was a rocky, uneven terrain, full of mountains and ravines, leaving barely any place for dense forests. Maya barely managed to see Irving in front of her and even he seemed to have problems with finding the way. One time, she nearly fell over a root, almost stooping to grabbing Irving's shoulders to keep her balance. But after a few minutes of silent walking, she saw what Irving had seen as they first entered the forest: a small glade, roughly in the middle of the forest. Dim moonlight scarcely illuminated a lush meadow and a slightly hunched figure standing in the middle.

Maya gave Irving a stern look, signaling him to stay without making any noise. Walking in silence for the past minutes had probably stressed him enough, she didn't want to test her luck by trusting him with not making any noise while approaching a potentially dangerous man. Luckily, Irving understood immediately and simply pulled an arrow out of his quiver, giving Maya

a determined nod in the process. It would have been reassuring to have an archer on her side, if this archer wouldn't look like Irving Todd, with his ridiculous moustache and his big belly. As she pulled out one of her daggers, she regretted the decision to go without Gregar, or even worse, without Knightfang. The direwolf would have been enough to keep her safe from half a dozen men. But all she had was Irving...

As Maya stepped onto the meadow, she felt terribly vulnerable for a moment. All around her was forest, forest in which archers could hide, better archers than Irving. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to quit thinking like that. Who would ambush her in this forest? Nobody would expect her. As she sneaked closer towards the figure, she realized it was an older man with a bald head. He was looking in the other direction, not noticing her, standing still, almost motionless, holding something in his hands. She couldn't see his face, but she saw that he was wearing a white, shapeless piece of clothing, similar to the long robes people from the Free Cities sometimes wore. What was he doing in the forest? Something was not right here, something was not...

A loud crack behind her, caused her and the old man to turn around. Irving had stepped onto the meadow and promptly fell over a root, landing face forward in the mud. She gave him an angry glare as he looked up, in her direction, making a surprised noise as he saw the old man.

"What in the names of the gods of the forest are you doing here?", the old man asked with a stern voice. Maya saw that he had a long, white beard and was thin, almost gaunt. And in his hand, he was holding a fat, agitatedly cooing pigeon. Before Maya could give him an answer, the old man leant forward, kissing the pigeon on the back. "Shhh, it's okay Hildemara, it's okay. Don't get nervous, these are just two lost souls, asking for the advice of Dimitri the Wise", he said, gently stroking the pigeon's back, while looking at Maya. "Isn't that right, pretty child?"

"Ah... I... I...", Maya stuttered, noticing that her jaw dropped. She was following a madman into a forest? That was the mysterious light she had seen? "I... I..." She tried to say something, looking from the old man to the cooing pigeon in his hands. She barely noticed that Irving finally rose from the ground, picking up Gregar's bow in the process. "Who the hells are you?", he growled towards the man, who finally gave him a kind smile.

"Ah, another lost soul has decided to participate our stimulating conversation", he said enthusiastically with a surprisingly articulate voice. "My name is Dimitri the Wise, the revered philosopher" With these words he gave them a kind smile and opened his hands, letting the pigeon fly away from him. "And this is Hildemara, my pigeon companion, the love of my life" Maya looked from Irving to the old man, noticing that her jaw slightly dropped. "What?", she finally asked. "You are what?" The old man raised an eyebrow, before taking an elegant bow. "My name is Dimitri the Wise, the revered philosopher!", he proclaimed again. "Known in Westeros from the North to Dorne"

Again, Maya could only stare at this strangely dressed, bald-headed man who had just kissed a pigeon. "You are what?", she asked again, looking to Irving for help. "A philosopher", her companion explained. "I've met one in Gulltown a few years ago. They are basically unemployed vagrants who tell other people what to think" Maya shook her head, finally snapping out of the confusion that befell her as she laid eyes on this bizarre man. "I know what a philosopher is", she hissed. "And I know what a crazy hermit is" She shook her head in disbelief. "We just chased after a crazy, old hermit for at least half an hour!"

This caused the old man to let out an indignant groan. "You are quite rude, young woman, for invading my forest, insulting my intelligence and scaring my pigeon!" Maya opened her mouth to answer, even though she wanted nothing more than to return to her camp and to her warm blanket. She had dealt with crazy people before and rarely found them worth of any interaction. However, as she was about to give him a rude answer, she noticed something odd about the situation. Well, something odd she hasn't noticed before. Irving had seen a light. She had seen the hint of a light. The light was the only reason they went into this forest. But this old man had no light with him. No torch, no lantern...

"We have followed a light into this forest. We wanted to check if it might be potentially dangerous for our group...", she explained and Dimitri's stern look softened. "I see...", he mumbled. "Then you are not here to learn from me?" His voice sounded disappointed and almost caused Maya to feel an ounce of pity for him. Almost. "No", she said with a determined voice.

For a moment Dimitri looked disappointed, but he quickly regained his composure. "I see", he said. "That is disappointing, but those who claim that they don't seek the light, just don't know what they are seeking for" Irving shook his head. "Well, but we are seeking for the light", he insisted, heavily annoyed. For a moment, Maya was satisfied by this conversation, if only because it meant that Irving learned how annoying he could be sometimes.

Dimitri gave him a nod. "I understand your intentions, lonely travellers. You thought I was the man with the lantern, right?", he deduced. Maya nodded in annoyance. "Well, young woman, I am simply a wandering philosopher, trying to gain spiritual enlightenment by getting closer to the gods of the forest in this wonderful night. If someone seeks my counsel, I will try my best to help him with existential problems" He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. "What is the meaning of life? What is the way to the Seven Heavens? Why are we here?", he said, apparently to himself.

Maya stopped listening to him as Irving tugged at her cloak. "Maya", he whispered. "Why are we here, Maya? Why are we here? Why do the Seven punish us, Maya?" He tried his best to imitate Dimitri's voice and finally caused Maya to burst in laughter due to the absurdity of her situation.

Dimitri stopped his monologue, looking at Maya in a mixture of confusion and insultation.

"Excuse me, why are you laughin?", he asked. Before Maya could answer, Irving stepped forward. "Well, we have a question, old man", he said. "You said something about a man with a lantern... well, we are looking for the man with the lantern. Where is he?"

Dimitri seemed to relax. "A question you have asked I shall answer you, impatient young man", he intoned. "The man with the lantern went in that direction" He pointed east. "He is meeting with several other men, nasty individuals. Hildemara is afraid of them and shuns their presence and so do I. Upright travellers, such as you, shouldn't seek their proximity"

Irving shrugged. "Whatever you say, old man", he sneered. "Come on, Maya. We know the way. No need to waste time with this crazy old hermit" He began to walk away and Maya managed to give Dimitri an apologizing nod. "Sorry for him", she said. "You say these men are dangerous?" Dimitri looked from Irving to her, nodding in agreement. "Probably. Or at the very least, they are bad men. I would advice against approaching them", he explained. Maya looked after Irving, who already approached the forest again and shook her head. "They won't see us. We'll just find out if they are dangerous for our group and then we will continue our journey" She forced herself to give this madman a friendly smile. "Thank you for your help, Dimitri. Will you be alright?", she asked.

Dimitri grinned, stretched his hand above his head and Maya saw the pigeon landing on it. "As long as Hildemara is with me, nothing bad shall happen to me", he explained. "Which, in other words, means that I know a few tricks to stay hidden. But thank you for your concern, young woman"

"Maya, you coming? Or do you want to become a forest-dwelling pigeon breeder?", Irving called from across the meadow. Maya gave Dimitri a nod and started to walk towards Irving. The old man seemed to look after her for a short moment, but as she looked over her shoulder, she saw that he had turned around again, gently stroking the feathers of his pigeon.

"Well, that was bizarre", she remarked as she had reached Irving. Her companion nodded in agreement as they started to walk deeper into the forest. "You can say that. Why don't we have any philosophers in the Vale?", he answered. Maya thought about this for a moment.

"Shadowcats ate them", she mumbled.

Irving let out a moan. "Oh, yes, I forgot the fucking shadowcats. Another reason why I hate the bloody Vale. It's filled with Mountain Men and shadowcats and ambassadors...", he moaned, but Maya interrupted him. "And whiny, useless watchguards, and bronze bastards", she hissed. Irving gave her a nod. "Aye, I forgot the bronze bastards", he mumbled, but all of a sudden he grabbed Maya's cloak. "Silence!", he urged her, pointing at something in the distance. Maya had to narrow her eyes, but she finally saw a small light in the distance.

"Is that our man?", she whispered. Irving shook his head. "Men", he answered. "I see at least half a dozen shadows around a small fire. You really want to check that out?", he asked with a sheepish voice.

"I'll be careful. Stay behind, I want you to cover me", Maya answered. Irving gave her a determined nod. "You can count on me", he said and Maya wished she could believe him. As silent as possible, she started to approach the light. Soon, she saw that it was bigger than she thought at first, a small campfire. She saw a few figures sitting around it, but couldn't get a clear view on it. But what she saw was a second light, slowly approaching the camp. Maya started to sneak up to a few bushes, attempting to hide inside of them. It wasn't comfortable, but it was good enough for her and she was almost certain that the people around the campfire couldn't see her. She finally got a good view on them. Dirty, raggedy men, clad in leathery clothes, armed with daggers and short swords. Their number was hard to count as a result of the bad lighting, but they were at least half a dozen.

Finally, she saw the man who was nearing the campfire, carrying a small lantern with him. The men around the fire jumped up, immediately pulling out their swords. The new visitor, a tall man with a muscular body, a shorn head and a brown beard raised his hands. Maya saw the sword dangling at his side and was immediately struck by it's beauty. It was a longsword, resting in an elegant leathery sheet, the hilt consisting of blackened steel, a heart-shaped ruby embedded in it's pommel. She had heard about a heart-shaped ruby somewhere before...

"Easy, men", a loud voice growled, shifting Maya's attention to something she had thought of as a particularly dark rock when first observing the scenery. The rock turned out to be a man, the tallest man she had ever seen, clad in a blackened armour. He wasn't wearing a helmet and Maya saw that he was younger than she thought he would be, with shoulder-length dark hair, dark brown skin and a fresh scar running across his chin and mouth. His voice was dark, violent and thirsting for blood. "I believe he's our fucking guest"

The visitor gave him an ugly smile, his light blue eyes shining in anticipation. "Are you Bear?", he asked. The huge man, Bear, gave him a nod. "And you're fucking Anturion", he growled. The man shook his head. "Ser Rodrik Stone", he answered and Maya froze in terror. She knew this man. Everyone who had some dealing with the lords of the Vale knew this man. Ser Rodrik Stone the Kinslayer, Lord Corbray's bastard, Lord Corbray's murderer. And she knew the sword. Lady Forlorn, the ancient sword belonging to House Corbray. He had stolen it the day he slew his father. Just a few metres away from her stood the most wanted man in the Vale of Arryn. "Anturion is busy. He's searching for a new ally, a strong ally. You're negotiating with me now", Rodrik said with a cold glare and looked over the men. "Are these all of yours? You promised us fifty men for our cause" Bear took a step closer towards Rodrik. Even though the kinslayer was one of the tallest men Maya had ever seen, Bear was at least a head taller. "I alone am worth

fifty fucking men”, he growled. “The rest of my men is scattered over Raylan's lands. Sitting in his forest, sitting in his taverns, walking through his villages. Ready to strike on your command. Do you have the money for that?” Ser Rodrik gave him a nod and Maya listened in anticipation. They were talking about Raylan, about Raylansfair! What kind of conspiracy was she stumbling upon right now?

A noise behind her made her turn around, as well as causing Rodrik to raise his head. “Is someone there?”, he growled and Bear let out a howling laugh. “One of my men is out there. Patrolling the area, to make sure that we won't be fucking disturbed”

Maya noticed movement nearing her position from behind. A young scout with short blonde hair was walking around, slowly nearing her position. He was wielding a short sword and looked around, but apparently he hadn't spotted her so far. But she knew, in her current position it would only be a matter of time. She was practically invisible from the positions of Bear and Rodrik, but from the other side, she was highly visible. Her only cover was the darkness, unless she would somehow manage to crawl deeper into the bush. Closer towards Bear and Rodrik. She didn't know anything about Bear, but Rodrik alone would be bad enough. And then she saw something else behind the scout. Irving was standing there, his bow drawn, an arrow pointing at the man. With his eyesight, he had obviously seen her and was waiting for something, a signal, an order, to shoot this man in the head. She was about to raise her hand, as she remembered who exactly the man was she had to trust here. Was she really willing to try her luck with Irving Todd? What if he missed the scout? What if he failed to kill him immediately?

[Try to hide by crawling deeper into the bush]

Jaron

Jaron gave Martin a nod and saw the shocked look in Robb's face. “What?”, the man stuttered. “No... No!” He didn't manage to continue, as Martin's fist hit him in the face. “Fuck!”, Robb exclaimed, as Martin grabbed him at the collar of his shirt, delivering a second blow to his face, followed by a third.

“Okay, Robb. Here's how it's done”, Martin growled. “I'm asking you a few questions and every time I don't like your answer, I'm going to hit you” To prove his point, he punched him in the stomach, causing Robb to let out a pained groan. “Fuck. You”, he stuttered, his face already lightly bruised. Blood was flowing out of his nose and the look on his face was a mixture of pain and fear.

“Wrong fucking answer, Robb, wrong fucking answer”, Martin chuckled, punching him again.

“Fuck... Fuck... please no... Jaron, help!”, Robb begged, but Jaron shook his head. “Tell us the

truth and I'll stop him", he answered. Robb's facial expression switched to a truly desperate look. "I'm telling you the truth! Fuck don't let him...", he stuttered, but Martin cut him off by punching him in the ribs, pressing the air out of his lungs.

"First question, Robb", the mercenary growled. "Are you working for Butterfly?" He raised his fist and Robb flinched. "No... No! Fuck, I'm loyal to the Burned Man, I am loyal!", he pleaded. Martin's fist hit him in the face again, albeit lighter than before. "I don't believe you", he hissed, throwing Robb on the ground.

Jaron pressed his lips together as he saw how Martin kicked the other man violently in the ribs. He felt his own ribs as Robb yelled in pain. "I'm telling you the truth, I'm telling you the truth!", he screamed in panic. "I'm loyal! I never betrayed you! Don't hit me!"

Martin showed no mercy and continued to beat Robb, mainly targeting the man's face. "Tell me the truth!", he shouted, as he raised his hand again. Robb was trying to break free from Martin's grip, but as he noticed that the mercenary was stronger, he tried to protect his face from the punches. "Please!", he screamed and Jaron noticed tears running down the man's face.

"Please, I am not a traitor!" He sobbed pathetically. "Don't kill me! I was only following the Burned Man's orders!"

Martin hit him again and Jaron had to look away for a moment. "Please...", he heard Robb's cracking voice. He looked at Martin again, who was raising his hand for another punch. "I'm still not believing you, Robb", the mercenary growled.

"Martin!", Jaron shouted. Both, Martin and Robb, looked at him in surprise. "Let him go", he commanded. "I don't think he's a traitor" Martin looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Are you kidding me?", the mercenary said. Jaron shook his head. "Look at him", he commanded. Robb was hanging in Martin's grip, bloody, bruised, crying, looking pathetic. "He can't take much more. You want to kill him? You said he is a good man"

Martin pressed his lips together. "I said that", he admitted. "But that was before I found this little rat talking with the fucking cat!", he shouted angrily. "You've heard him! He talked to the Tom. They made plans...."

Now it was up to Robb to get angry. "Are you fucking listen to me?", he shouted at the top of his lungs. "I was ordered to defect. I played a fucking role! And you come here and beat me up just because you don't believe me!"

"We have every reason not to believe you, Robb", Martin growled. "You have no evidence of your innocence" Jaron narrowed his eyes as Martin raised his fist again. "Martin!", he shouted and the mercenary lowered his fist again. "And you have no evidence of my guilt!", Robb stuttered. "Besides, take me to the Burned Man and he will confirm my innocence"

Martin shook his head. "The hell we'll do!", he shouted and this time Jaron took a step forwards. Martin was about to kill the man and that would take it too far. That was something Jaron would

not stand for. "Martin...", he said softly. "It's okay. I don't think he's lying, or else he would have confessed by now"

He pointed at Robb, who was heavily bruised, his tears mixing with blood as they ran down his face. "Look at him. You think someone like him wouldn't have confessed by now? Do you want to kill him?" He saw Martin's face dropping as he considered what Jaron just said. Finally, the mercenary let out a sigh and released Robb from his grip. The other man sank to the ground, breathing in relief. He gave Jaron a thankful look. "You did the right decision", he said. "And I owe you my life"

Jaron answered with a cold glare. "I'm not doing this for you", he hissed. "But I'm a knight. I won't look away when people get killed over suspicions" Despite his pain, Robb managed to chuckle. "So, you're one of these people who think they are something better because someone put a 'Ser' in front of their name, right?", he managed to say. "Listen, hedge knight, bring me to the Burned Man and he will confirm my story!"

Martin pulled Robb up to his feet again, causing the other man to let out a pained groan. "You think we should do this?", he asked Jaron. "I do", Jaron answered. "We bring him to the Burned Man. And then we will decide how we continue"

The mercenary grinned as he patted Robb on the back. "You got lucky that Ser Jaron here is such a noble criminal", he said and Jaron slightly shivered as he heard these words. It was for a good cause. He wasn't here to aid the Burned Man, he was here to kill Butterfly. From what he had seen, the Burned Man was the better alternative. He wouldn't help him in his criminal activities, but he would help him in killing an even bigger monster. That's why he stayed. To protect the innocent, to help those in need... As he closed his eyes he saw Harpy, as they sat in the small hideout, drinking cheap wine, having a good time.

"Let's go...", Jaron mumbled and Martin gave him a curious look. "Have I said anything wrong, friend?", he asked. Jaron did not answer, instead he left the room and took a deep breath.

Perhaps he was already involved too deep in all of this. For the first time, he noticed that he didn't want to leave the city. He couldn't leave, not before that monster Butterfly would get what he deserved!

Martin and Robb left the room behind him. Robb was walking like a drunken man and the pale skin underneath his bruises made Jaron worry that Martin took it too far with the beating. He never wanted to kill the man or cause him serious harm. Especially since he had doubts about his guilt. "I'm going to bring you to the Burned Man", Martin proclaimed. "Don't try anything. You know I'm the better fighter" Robb mumbled something unintelligible and followed Martin and Jaron outside, leaving his run-down room behind.

As they walked through the streets of Oldtown, Jaron soon noticed from the position of the Hightower that they weren't walking towards the backalley where the Burned Man's hideout was located the last time. Robb stayed silent for most of the time, aside from the occasional pained groan. He was slightly staggering forwards and more than once, Jaron feared he might drop down unconscious. Martin was unusually silent too. His knuckles were bruised similar to Robb's face and his friendly smile was all but gone. He looked like a man who knew that he almost took it too far. And Jaron simply wasn't in a mood for smalltalk, so he appreciated the silence.

The buildings they passed soon got larger, more luxurious, in a much better shape than the barracks they had found Robb in. It was already way after sundown and the huge mansions that stood at the sides of the streets looked like giants, watching every of his steps. The huge fire at the top of the Hightower was burning now, showing it's position to ships a hundred miles across the sea. Beneath these huge buildings, Jaron felt smaller than before and he was painfully aware of his still wounded arm and ribs. He was perfectly able to swing his sword with one arm, but a single blow to his wounds could incapacitate him. It would be weeks until he could even think of fighting like he used to do. But he was sure that Butterfly would make his moves against them before he would have regained his full strength.

Martin lead them to a large mansion, four stories high, surrounded by a small wall. It was obviously a good neighbourhood, as evidenced by similar mansions all around this one. From here, the Hightower darkened a significant portion of the sky. A small lantern burned next to the large wooden door of the mansion. Martin took a short bow. "I present you the Burned Man's second hideout", he explained and caught Jaron's look. "He has several all over the city and changes them every week. That way he is able to evade Butterfly"

With these words they neared the door and Martin knocked on the door. "If we're lucky, Harpy already expected us and prepared a few refreshments", Martin said and his grin returned. "I'd kill for a good Arbor Gold" Jaron believed every word the mercenary said. He also noticed that Robb's face slightly dropped as he heard that. "What's the matter, Robb? You're not looking forward for free drinks? Or are you afraid of the Burned Man?", he asked. Robb shook his head. "It's not the Burned Man, no. I'm just not looking forward to meet his lovely bird"

Before Jaron could answer, the door was opened. Harpy was standing in the doorway, looking stunning as always, albeit the look on her face was cold as she saw Robb. She had her hair pinned-up with a sharp brazen hairpin and her dark eyes had a strangely distant look in them. "Harpies aren't birds, Robb", she greeted them with a sullen voice. "It's like calling a dragon a lizard" She turned around, giving them a handwave to enter. "Or like calling you a man"

The room behind her was lavishly furnished, full with elaborate decorations from the Free Cities. Myrish tapestry, Tyroshi wooden furniture, Pentoshi gold. For a moment, Jaron was amazed by

the display of wealth. Finally, Harpy seemed to notice Jaron and Martin. "Welcome", she greeted them "I see you brought Robb with you. Do you have a good explanation for that?"

Robb gave her a hasty nod. "A damn good explanation. I was nearly beaten to death by your pets for my loyalty!", he proclaimed and Martin clenched his fists. "Maybe you have an explanation why they have attacked me while I was on an assignment from the Burned Man himself?" Harpy shook her head, closing her eyes. "We're talking about that later", she mumbled and for a moment, it appeared as if she was blinking tears away.

"Is everything alright?", Jaron asked immediately, taking a step towards her, completely ignoring Robb and Martin. She shook her head, pointing towards a small seating area in the corner of the entrance hall. "Let me explain", she mumbled.

The four of them sat down, with Robb being seated directly next to Martin, who still seemed to be ready to finish his work. Jaron sat directly in front of Harpy as she took a deep breath. "While you were gone, a few things happened. First, a friend of yours is currently our guest", she explained, but before Jaron could intervene, she cut him off with a handwave. "Later", she said sullenly. "More importantly, while your friend was busy talking to the Burned Man, a message arrived"

This time Jaron actually saw tears in her eyes. "As punishment for the failure to capture your friends aboard the Princess, Butterfly took five of our little ones, tortured them, raped them, mutilated them and threw them out in the gutters to die", she explained with a cracking voice.

"The oldest was twelve. The youngest was seven. She was still alive when one of our men found her, but she died before she reached us" Again, she had to pause, slightly shivering.

"Butterfly, Butterfly", she mumbled. "That's what she said when our agent found her. A message. He is preparing for his endgame"

Robb let out a sigh. "Well, surely that's horrible, but they kinda knew the risk, right?", he said, as Martin gave him a slightly shocked glare. Before he could continue, Harpy jumped up and in a swift movement she pulled out her hairpin and almost rammed it into Robb's crotch, holding it only inches away from him. The speed of her movement surprised Jaron, as well as the rage in her eyes, starkly contrasting her spine-chillingly cold voice. "Say another word, Robb, and you won't be a man anymore", she whispered softly. "I won't tolerate you mocking them. They deserve better"

Robb, his face as pale as snow, gave her a shivering nod and she threw the hairpin on the ground, sitting down again, her dark reddish-brown hair now slightly covering her face. "They deserved better...", she mumbled again and the sullen look in her eyes got replaced by a determined one. "Justice is the only thing left to give them. Butterfly is tearing this city apart if we don't stop him. I won't tolerate another dead child, tortured just to send us a message" The look

she gave Jaron, but especially Robb, made him shiver. "Well, I got the fucking message. And I intend to send him an answer"

Robb leant forwards and started to grin, his bruised face regaining a bit of colour. "And perhaps I can help here", he said and earned himself a sharp glare from Martin. "That is beyond debate", the mercenary said. "We're not doing that!"

"What is it?", Harpy asked and Jaron slightly closed his eyes. He knew what Robb was about to propose and he had hoped this wouldn't happen. For her sake, he had hoped Robb would just drop this. "I know how to lure Butterfly out of his hideout", the man said with a sly grin. "The reason your new pet almost killed me. I was faking my defection to the Solvers. Was talking to the Tom. And I know how to contact them"

Harpy raised an eyebrow, looking to Jaron who gave her a short nod. "And how exactly can that help us?", she asked, but Jaron understood from her slightly shaking voice, that she already knew what he was suggesting. "Butterfly is cautious, but we know that there is one prize he would claim himself", Robb said and Harpy closed her eyes. "You're suggesting a trap...", she mumbled. "That is either the chance we have been waiting for, or the most recklessly stupid idea I have ever heard..." She looked up at Jaron. "Can we be sure he's telling us the truth?", she asked.

Jaron shook his head. "He said the Burned Man could vow for his innocence", he explained. "But I can't" He looked her deep in the eyes and pressed his lips together. "Harpy, you know that this is dangerous" She gave him a nod. "I know", she answered with a sad voice. "But after today, I don't care anymore"

She raised from her chair and looked towards one of the doors. "The Burned Man is currently speaking with your friend, Jaron. But I'm going to ask him about Robb now", she explained. "In the meantime, make sure he doesn't piss on the floor, or whatever mangy dogs like him usually do" She looked Robb straight in the eye. "Behave, Robb. I haven't forgotten a damn thing you did and I certainly haven't forgiven it!"

With these words, she left the three men behind, entering one of the doors behind her. Robb was grinning at Jaron as he looked after her. "I see...", the man chuckled. "So that's why such a noble knight like you is working with us" Jaron gave him an angry look, but it was Martin who answered first. "Not now, Robb", the mercenary answered. "Not the right time"

This caused the mercenary to chuckle. "Excuse me, Martin, but I'm afraid someone failed to explain Ser Bastard here how things work" His tone sounded hostile and Jaron looked up.

"What are you calling me?", he hissed. Robb raised an eyebrow, his grin now making Jaron furious. "You heard me, Ser Bastard. Maybe I should call you 'Harpy's little toy', would that be better?"

Martin almost jumped from his chair as he turned to Robb. "Careful now, Robb", he growled. This caused Robb to chuckle. "I think there are a few things that need to be explained to Ser Bastard", he answered.

"Jaron", Jaron muttered. Robb looked up, giving him a curious look. "What?", he asked. "My name is Jaron", Jaron answered. "Not 'Ser Bastard'. Call me Ser Bastard one more time and I will break your fucking nose!" Robb shrugged and leant back in his chair. "Alright then 'Jaren'", he said, apparently slightly amused. "Maybe you haven't noticed it, but I see how you look at the precious little Lady Harpy"

Jaron narrowed his eyes. "What are you implying?", he growled, noticing that his voice sounded more hostile than he wanted it to sound. Robb noticed it too and his grin got wider. "I'm sure it's hard to think clearly when she's close, right? Hard to focus when she bats her eyelashes, isn't it? Hard to disagree with her when she's so kind to you, don't you agree?", he answered and leant forwards. "We have more in common than you think we have"

This caused Jaron to shake his head. "I am nothing like you", he answered. "And I have no idea what you're trying to tell me" Robb's grin vanished. "Then listen, Jaren, listen and learn", he said and Martin gave him a glare. "That's not a good time, Robb", he said. Robb shook his head.

"Oh, I'm sure there's never the right time to badmouth your little princess"

He looked back at Jaron. "Trust me, we have something in common. I mean, don't you see that this is their little trick? You come here into this city, alone, poor, desperate for work. And there she is, stunning, gentle, representing the less rotten side of this city. Charming, generous, apparently she's starting to like you just as you start to like her", he explained, but was cut off by Martin.

"That's enough, Robb! Don't twist your story to make you appear like a victim", he barked. Robb shook his head. "I don't twist anything", he answered. "It's hard to believe, but when I came here, two years ago, I was actually quite a looker, strong, handsome and capable. Cheap alcohol ruined me, but before that, she ruined me. She made me do everything for her, everything to be close to her. But when I made a move on her, she shot me down, called me pathetic and disgusting..." He paused for a moment, his smile becoming a bit more sad. "Of course, at this point it was too late for me to get out of this. I killed for her. Never for him. He lacks her charisma, her looks. I did it all for her. Just like you do now"

Martin shook his head. "Don't believe a word he says. Robb was always pathetic, while Harpy is always kind when she meets someone new. He misinterpreted her behaviour towards him, developed feelings for her, when she was just polite. And when she did not reciprocate his feelings, he accused her of playing with him. Called her a few bad things. She nearly stabbed him for that. And that turned him into this drunken son of a bitch he is today"

Robb let out a sigh. "Sure, Martin. You never tried anything with her, you saw right through her. But Jaren here, he isn't as smart as you are", he said and Jaron narrowed his eyes as he heard the man's insult. "Trust me, hedge knight, today she's all yours. But as soon as you have no use for her anymore, she will drop you like the bastard you are"

Jaron almost jumped up from his chair. Only the pain in his ribs prevented him from doing it.

Robb noticed this and chuckled. "Your ribs giving you problems? Or do you have *butterflies* in your stomach, Ser Bastard?"

This finally caused Jaron to jump up, despite the pain. Before Robb could react, Jaron grabbed him at the collar of his shirt, raising his fist. "What have I told you?", he growled. The man grinned at him. "Oh, look how furious you get when I question your feelings... Go ahead, punch me. Maybe you'll find a spot Martin hasn't found yet. Or maybe you see the truth in what I say. We started the same way in this city. We have a lot in common, *Ser Bastard*"

[Let go of him]

Drent

"Good one!", Montclair congratulated him as Drent managed to parry a quick riposte from the Sergeant. Instead of answering, Drent let out a grunt and made a quick strike to his opponent's ribs. Montclair quickly parried with his shield, before starting a counter-attack. "You're fast", he said, as Drent managed to parry yet another strike. "But you lack raw strength. It's not the most important part when it comes to swordplay, but it's your weakness"

Drent saw Montclair putting all his power into his next strike and got ready to parry with all his strength. Still, the blow was hard enough to knock the sword out of his hands and send him staggering backwards. "Like I said, you lack strength", the Sergeant said again and struck before Drent was able to pick up his sword. "And in a battle, you would be dead by now", he shouted. But instead of hitting him, his sword only hit the air as Drent dodged the strike and jumped forward, hitting the Sergeant in the stomach with his head and throwing him on the ground.

As Drent lay on top of him, fixating his arms on the ground, Montclair started to laugh. "But you know a few mean tricks, I give you that", he said and his smile vanished. "Still, the Storm King does not appreciate of manoeuvres like that. Neither do I" Drent raised from the ground, helping the Sergeant up in the process. "What do you mean?", he asked, breathing heavily.

"It's not only unchivalrous, it's also dangerous, even in a training session", Montclair explained and poked Drent with the tip of his training sword. "You know that these swords are dulled, but you could have still impaled yourself on it if I had lowered my sword just a little bit"

Drent frowned as he heard this. He hadn't thought that far, had just seen a way to win the fight despite being disarmed. "I understand", he answered, picking up his sword. "Another round?", he asked. Montclair gave him a nod and looked to the sky. "Should be close to supper. One more round, Golton, then we should go inside. Fighting all day is one thing, but missing a meal over it?", he said and chuckled. "Never"

With these words he started to deliver a rain of blows targeted at Drent's chest. He started with easy strikes, but progressively proved a better challenge. Drent had to admire the Sergeant's skill, but also the patience he showed with his men. But he also noticed that Montclair put too much effort in his strikes, getting out of breath far earlier than Drent. As soon as he saw the Sergeant huffing, trying to catch breath, he took the offensive, striking his opponent's arms. While the shield arm was heavily guarded, Montclair got into problems as he tried to parry the strikes towards his sword arm. "Good...", he started to say but let out a pained groan as Drent hit his forearm, causing him to drop his sword.

Instead of using the advantage of having a disarmed opponent, Drent paused and grinned at the Sergeant. Montclair gave him a nod, while holding his arm. "That fucking hurt, Golton", he said with a grin. "But it was a good strike. What you lack in strength, you make up for with your speed. You're good with a spear, right?"

Drent gave him a short nod. "I'd even say I'm a bit more than good", he said with a grin.

Montclair shook his head. "And you're arrogant. Still, the spear is a good weapon for you. Keep the enemy at distance, where his strength does not matter", he advised him. "Anyways, I know why I chose you for that mission"

This got Drent's attention. "This mission...", he said. "Can you tell me anything more about it?"

Montclair shook his head. "Not much. Not here. Lady Tarel only told me the basics. Garen is involved and Ser Emphrys too, as far as I know"

This caused Drent to frown. Ser Emphrys Dresfel was among the Storm King's best knights, sure, but he was also reckless and battle-hungry. What kind of mission needed Ser Emphrys? And Garen... well, he was a completely different problem. He wasn't a soldier, but a mercenary, a close friend of one of King Argilac's most trusted knights and an even closer friend to Lady Tarel, if the rumours were true. He and Drent weren't exactly friends, to say the least.

"That sounds wonderful", Drent said with feigned joy and Montclair gave him a stern look. "I know you're not too thrilled about working with Garen. But the Storm King approved of him and I am not in a position to question his choices" His tone got a bit colder. "And neither are you, have you understood?" Drent gave him a nod. "Loud and clear, Sergeant" Montclair's face softened a

bit. "Good man. I know you'd understand", he said and looked towards the huge tower of Storm's End. "Come on now. Enough training for today. It's time to fill our bellies with hot soup and cold ale"

They didn't got very far, as Drent noticed someone walking out of the tower. Most of the soldiers, except the ones on duty, had already left the courtyard, either to join the diplomatic meeting, or to get a good seat for supper, so Drent was slightly surprised to see someone walking out of the Hall. A closer look identified the man as Ser Emphryus Dresfel. He was wearing fine clothing in the yellow and black of House Durrandon, fitting for a knight of his status. Drent noticed that Dresfel still had his sword with him, a fine and ancient weapon, carried by his ancestors for hundreds of years. It was a one-handed, slightly curved blade, a weapon worthy of a true warrior.

He walked straight towards them and Montclair immediately snapped to attention. Drent followed his example a bit slower. Dresfel greeted them with a short nod. "Sergeant Montclair", he said, ignoring Drent as expected.

"Ser Emphryus! It's an honour", Montclair answered. "May I help you with anything?" Dresfel looked from him to Drent. "I've heard we're having the honour of going on a mission for the Storm King soon", he said, his deep voice shivering in anticipation. "At least that's what Schodek told me earlier"

"Ser Baron is involved too?", Montclair asked and Drent suppressed a sigh. Ser Baron Schodek was pretty much an older version of Ser Emphryus, a childhood friend of King Argilac and a fearsome warrior in his own right. What kind of mission needed two hot-headed and battle-hungry warriors? Three, he corrected himself, there was still Garen. He couldn't lie, he wasn't looking forward for that mission.

To his relief, Dresfel shook his head. "Only in the planning stages. There is some trouble on our northern border and King Argilac sends him to negotiate. Apparently, there are hostilities between Lord Rosby and Lord Stokeworth over some territorial mess. Lord Darklyn declared his support for Rosby in that matter, even though he and Stokeworth are both sworn to Harren Hoare", he said with a grin. "If things get bad, we'll have a nice little war against Harren the Black"

Drent and Montclair exchanged a short look. "But I thought we prepared for invading the Vale", Drent said after a while. Dresfel started to laugh. "Arryn, Hoare, Gardener, Martell... We could take all of them at once without breaking a sweat. King Argilac knows that and without a doubt, Harren Hoare knows it too"

"So we're going to war?", Drent asked. Dresfel shook his head. "Not if Schodek is successful in negotiating. Rosbys and Stokeworths are stubborn petty lords and I've never trusted a fucking Darklyn, so perhaps there's still a chance for war", he answered. "But sadly, I wouldn't count on

it. Seems like the Dornish Marches are all I'll ever get for excitement in my career" As he looked at Montclair, his face got an envious look on it. "You've fought against the Reach, right?", he asked with a slight grin. Montclair gave him a nod. "As a young recruit", he answered. "Standing knee-deep in blood and mud at the battle of Blackhaven isn't exactly my definition of glory" This caused Dresfel to laugh. "It sounds lovely", he chuckled. "Anyway, I'm not just here to do some smalltalk with common soldiers. The king wants to keep you close, now that you've been assigned to his special mission. You'll be part of the guard, stationed directly at his table tonight" Drent's face dropped as he heard that and his stomach rumbled a little bit. Dresfel noticed his look and shook his head. "No complaining, soldiers, I'm not in the mood for that. You'll get to eat some of the leftovers later"

Before Drent could answer, Montclair cut him off. "No complaining intended, Ser!", he said. "We were just on our way to the Great Hall" Dresfel gave them a satisfied nod. "Good to hear", he answered. "I'll bring you to the Hall. Follow me!"

With these words, Ser Emphryus turned around and started to march towards the tower. Drent and Montclair exchanged a look, shrugged almost simultaneously and followed him. Drent had no doubts that Montclair was similarly hungry, but the Sergeant was too dutiful to complain about that.

The Great Hall of Storm's End claimed most of the towers second and third floor. It was a huge, round room, the walls at least twelve feet high, with balconies built in a height of eight feet for spoilt noblemen who refused to sit down with the smallfolk and the soldiers of Storm's End. The Storm King was sitting down there, albeit his honour table was built on a small pedestal to make it stick out of the mass of tables that surrounded it. Some of his ancestors had preferred to eat in one of the balconies, but Argilac Durrandon was different. He valued his soldiers more than he valued some of his noblemen. Noblemen that were especially eager to please their king took the hint and started to eat downstairs with the commoners, albeit they looked horribly out of place.

Lead by Ser Emphryus, Drent and Montclair passed the tables of the morbidly obese Lord Morrigen and the visibly disgusted Lord Tarth before reaching the honour table. A second, smaller table was built in front of it, meant for the entourage of honoured guests that visited Storm's End. Right now, four men sat around this smaller table, all of them clad in the black and red of House Targaryen, all of them sporting shoulder-long silver-blond hair and delicate, almost feminine facial features. Their leader, a thin, somewhat lanky man in his mid thirties, was positioned at the honour table, his silver-blond hair cut shorter than that of his men. He was sporting a short beard, albeit Drent found the sight of this silver beard ridiculous. Those of valyrian blood weren't known to look especially manly and a beard didn't help with it. Still, the

ambassador had a calm, honest look in his purple eyes. He was seated right between King Argilac and Princess Argella, an exceptional honour reserved for the most revered of guests. Besides him, only king and princess sat on the table, most of the seats reserved for King Argilac's advisors were empty.

King Argilac wasn't wearing his armour anymore, instead he was wearing a black tunic, fabricated out of myrish silk. His massive crown was still resting on his head, the look on his gaunt face was a bit darker than usual, albeit his bushy, black beard made it hard for Drent to read the Storm King's expression. His daughter Argella was looking the complete opposite of her father. Radiant, with a charming smile and a breathtaking body underneath her thin blue dress, made the Storm Princess an object of desire in the eyes of many men inside of this hall. However, no man would be foolish enough to give in to his desires. Argella's sharp tongue was arguably even worse than her father's fury, but both of them combined were enough to scare any potential suitor. Right now, Argella had a smile on her face, as cold as a winter sun. The ambassador didn't seem to notice it, since he visibly enjoyed her company, talking, laughing, having a great time.

Dresfel pointed at a spot behind the honour table, where a large door frame lead towards a staircase, that lead towards the Storm King's war chambers. "You'll stand there, left and right of the door frame. Nobody would attack the Storm King at supper, so it's mainly representing, but everyone in this hall will see you, so make sure you look attentive. No moaning, no yawning, don't pick your nose or your ears, don't even dare to relax, understood?"

"Yes Ser!", Montclair exclaimed, albeit he kept his voice down in the presence of the Storm King. Dresfel gave him a nod. "Good. Do your job well and you'll get the leftovers from the kings table", he explained and took a seat at the honour table, to King Argilac's right. Seeing only four people at the honour table was an odd sight, usually there were twelve or more lords and advisers sitting there. Drent and Montclair quickly took position to the sides of the door frame, having a perfect sight on the honour table from their position. The two soldiers quickly exchanged a short grin. Usually, they weren't that close to the Storm King.

"Soldiers! My friends!", the Storm King exclaimed with his thundering voice and raised from his chair. "Today is a very special day, because we have honoured guests with us!" He pointed at the smiling ambassador next to him. "Ambassador Corilyan Celtigar and his noble entourage have decided to pay us a visit, in the name of Lord Aegon Targaryen! Greet them appropriately!" As he said these words, the soldiers started to clap their hands, their combined noise was deafening and boomed through the hall. Ambassador Celtigar was grinning like an imbecile and raised from his chair to give the soldiers a short bow, before sitting down again. "Thank you, your grace, for the hospitality you give me and my men. I am honoured", he said with a mellifluous, well-educated voice. Drent noticed the dangerous look in Durrandon's eyes and had

to gulp, but Celtigar seemed to be oblivious to it. "Are you honoured?", the Storm King said and his smile looked forced. "Well, I assume you know our customs, don't you? Bread and Salt?" Celtigar gave him a nod. "Yes, your grace. Ancient tradition is important, albeit I have to admit that House Celtigar never followed them", he explained. "Well, but House Durrandon does. Nobody shall say that I would ever mistreat someone who ate my bread and salt", the king answered and raised his hand. "Go to the kitchen. Fetch bread and salt for Ambassador Celtigar and his entourage!"

Two servants left the hall with quick steps and Drent saw the Storm King's smile vanishing. He and Montclair exchanged another look and Drent saw anticipation and surprise in the sergeant's eyes. Something was not right. Something was about to happen.

"Well, I believe in a simple principle when dealing with my men, ambassador", Durrandon said. "Everything we two discussed earlier should be made public, to avoid rumours" Celtigar gave him a nod. "A noble principle, your grace", he agreed. The Storm King pointed at the princess "My daughter, Princess Argella", he introduced her. "Perhaps you want to tell her what we just discussed" His voice got a bit lower, but again, Celtigar seemed to be completely oblivious. He smiled at the princess with charming, pearly-white teeth.

"It is an honour, princess. May I remark that you surpass the tales of your beauty and grace?", he said and kissed her outstretched hand. Argella's smile was ice-cold as she bowed her head. "The pleasure is all mine, ambassador", she said and exchanged a look with her father. "What is it you and my father discussed?"

Celtigar cleared his throat before he answered. "Well, as you know, Lord Aegon is interested in a military alliance between Dragonstone and the Stormlands. Your father offered your hand in marriage to Lord Aegon", he explained and Argella's smile seemed now visibly forced. "A noble offer, when a father sells his only child and heiress for three dragons", she remarked. "I can hardly contain my excitement" This caused Emphryus Dresfel to chuckle, while the Storm King and his daughter exchanged a quick smirk. Drent sighed. The princess' behaviour reminded him of a cat that was playing with a mouse. A completely and horribly oblivious mouse.

Celtigar gave her a confused look before continuing with his tale, completely oblivious to the danger he was possibly in. Drent shook his head in disbelief. This oaf should get the hell out of there instead of chatting casually with two gathering storms. "Sadly, Lord Aegon has to refuse the offer. He already has two wives he loves dearly and can't bear the thought of favouring one of them. Three wives would make it impossible not to favour someone", he explained and Argella narrowed her eyes.

"So, is he refusing my hand because he fears that I might replace his feeling for Lady Rhaenys or Lady Visenya?", she asked. "Or is he refusing my hand because I am not related to him?" Her

voice sent shivers down Drent's spine. "Perhaps my chances with the Dragonlord would be better if I was his sister?"

Celtigar shook his head in confusion. "I'm afraid I don't understand, my princess...", he mumbled and Argella shot him a vicious glare. "Oh, I'm afraid you understand perfectly, ambassador. I think Lord Aegon is afraid that he couldn't handle me", she hissed and caused roaring laughter from the surrounding soldiers, her father laughing the loudest. "One night with me and he would never touch his sisters again" This caused the laughter to intensify and Drent had to join in. Argella gave the ambassador a sly smirk. "A feat, as I must say, that most men manage to achieve without spending a night with me"

Celtigar shook his head. "It's love, my princess, that influenced his decision. Surely, even the thought of your legendary beauty would be enough to give Lord Aegon weak knees. But out of love for his wives, he has to decline your fathers noble offer. He wants to stay faithful to Lady Visenya and Lady Rhaenys", he explained and his statement caused the Storm Princess to laugh brightly, but without any joy. "Do you know how I call a man who speaks of fidelity while bedding both of his sisters at the same time?", she asked. Celtigar opened his mouth, but before he could answer, Argella cut him off. "A hypocrite, Ambassador Celtigar, a hypocrite" As she said this, the look in her deep blue eyes got a bit more curious. "Or is it true what they say? That he shuns Visenya and only sleeps with Rhaenys?", she asked with feigned innocence in her voice. Celtigar viciously shook his head. "My princess, I'm afraid you are insulting my liege lord", he protested and Argella's face got stone-cold and deadly serious. "Good", she answered. "As it was intended. Here in Storm's End, we believe in justice. An insult for an insult. Luckily, simply refusing my fathers offer is only a minor insult, whatever depraved reasons Lord Aegon might have"

She and her father exchanged another look, just as Drent and Montclair did the same. Drent shook his head and formed the word 'Fool' with his mouth, while Montclair returned the look with a stony face.

"But you can tell Lord Aegon that I wouldn't have shared him either way. Not with his other wives, or sisters, or whatever he might call them. In a certain way it is me who refuses Lord Aegon's hand", Argella hissed, before her smile returned, like the sun after a storm. "I believe we can all agree that I deserve better than him" She looked up at the crowd in front of her. "Is the stable master's son already taken? The handsome one I mean, not the hare-lipped one" "I am, my princess!", a handsome young man in his early twenties proclaimed as he raised from his chair. "Since last week" This caused a wave of roaring laughter from the crowd, albeit Argella and her father laughed the loudest. The princess raised a small crystal glass in front of her, filled

with red wine. "Congratulations, my friend", she shouted. "Men, drink one to the stable master's son and his lovely wife. Long life for them!" The order was shouted in a tone that could have come from the Storm King himself. It was almost frightening for Drent how much Argella resembled her father and how different she was at the same time.

The people in the crowd raised their jugs, shouted their congratulations and took a deep gulp, while the face of the man who spoke got bright red, with pride and embarrassment. Ambassador Celtigar's face got slightly red too, albeit only out of embarrassment. He seemed to be one of those men who were unable to get angry, no matter how much their liege lord got mocked.

"My princess, have you just implied that a stable master's son would be as good as Lord Aegon when it comes to marrying you?", he asked. Argella shook her head, causing the ambassador to sigh in relief. "Of course not, dear ambassador. I'm afraid that was a misunderstanding"

Celtigar smiled at her, his smile giving his lack of intelligence away immediately. Drent always hated pearly-white smiles, at least when it came to men. Nobleborn women, like the Storm Princess, took pride in teeth like that, but a man with a womanish smile like that was hardly a man at all. King Argilac had a light brown smile, several of his teeth were missing. In Drent's eyes it only added to his masculinity. Celtigar on the other hand... Drent was almost willing to bet that he was secretly a woman, if it weren't for his pleasant, deep voice.

"Ah, good, because I had the impression...", he started to mumble, as Argella cut him off again.

"I simply implied that the stablemaster's son would have been a better choice than a depraved, sister-fucking hypocrite, dear ambassador", she answered and gave him a sweet smile. "With all due respect of course"

Drent noticed that Argella had almost managed to reach the point where the Ambassador got seriously angry. He also noticed that the servants that were ordered to bring bread and salt should have been back by now. Something was not right. Argilac Durrandon planned something. He wasn't the most cunning king of Westeros and Drent wasn't afraid to admit that. But whenever he planned something, it was something truly terrific.

"Excuse me, my princess, but I have to protest against your continuing mockery of my liege lord!", he exclaimed and the king put a hand on his shoulder, causing the ambassador's face to drop and his skin to go pale. "I agree with you, ambassador. Argella, this is enough", he said.

His voice sounded deep and serious, but Celtigar wasn't able to see his face, that showed nothing but cruel amusement. "But the poor ambassador has something else to proclaim.

Something we talked about. I'm sure you're going to be interested in this, daughter" He looked at the crowd. "You're all going to be interested in that", he shouted. "And that's an order!" This caused laughter among his men, albeit Drent was only half sure that it was intended as a joke.

Celtigar seemed to regain his composure. "Of course, your grace", he said with a sigh. "My apologies if it seemed as if I was about to lose my nerves. Your daughter has a blessed

tongue” “You mean 'cursed'”, Argilac answered and laughed. “Try to raise a girl like her for twenty years and you know what true suffering is” He sighed. “But a father is a father. How can I be angry at my radiant daughter?” His gaze, still unseen for the ambassador, hardened considerably. “And how can I let any insult to her go unpunished?”

Once again, the ambassador proved his stupidity by ignoring this last statement. “I understand, your grace. I'm sure your daughter meant no insult”, he said and Argella quickly shook her head.

“But you are right of course. There is a reason why I took the long road to Storm's End personally. In his wisdom, Lord Aegon made a counteroffer” Princess Argella leant forward, putting the ambassador off his stride as she revealed the low neckline of her blue dress.

“A... counteroffer”, he said again, while the Storm Princess looked at him with her big blue eyes and a slight, but almost genuine smile. He cleared his throat. “I mean, while he is sadly unable to accept your father's noble offer for the reasons we just discussed, he is still interested in a close alliance with the Stormlands. For these reasons, he would like to offer you the hand of his close friend and general of his armies, Orys Baratheon”

Argella's smile vanished again, replaced by a look that promised nothing good. “Orys Baratheon”, she said toneless. “Orys. Baratheon” Ambassador Celtigar gave her a quick nod. “Indeed. General Orys is a renowned warrior. He fought gloriously in the war against Volantis and gained honour when he broke the siege of Lys. He fought side by side with your father during this war, as I must add”

King and Princess looked at each other, Argilac slightly shaking his head. Drent had no doubt that Celtigar's men noticed it, but none of them had enough bravery to intervene. “He is a bastard”, Argella hissed. “He offers me a bastard...” Celtigar shook his head. “A general”, he urged her. “His most trusted friend”

“A BASTARD!”, Argella shouted, making the ambassador flinch with her suddenly loud voice. “I am the Storm Princess, I will be the Storm Queen after my father's death! And your Dragonlord has the nerve to offer me a bastard? How can he dare?”

Celtigar gave her a confused look. “I'm sure he meant no offence, my princess. Lord Aegon is from the blood of Old Valyria. In his opinion, you take this bastardy thing a bit too seriously. General Orys is of noble blood and a good and honourable man”

The princess shook her head, her black locks moving like water. “So, it's either a Degenerate who prefers his own sisters over me or a Bastard”, she hissed and gave her father a smile. “Oh father, my father, what wonderful suitors you have found for me”, she chirped.

Argilac gave his daughter a short nod. “I was as baffled as you were, sweet daughter”, he said. “Perhaps even more. Because I never thought Lord Aegon could be that impudent” He smirked and Argella showed her own cruel smirk in return. “It's the dragons, dear father. As soon as a man has access to flying lizards, he thinks the whole world belongs to him. He thinks he can

marry his own sisters, thinks he can marry a princess from the blood of gods to a bastard, when the highest of lords would be barely enough. He thinks he can send an ambassador into my father's hall, to insult me, to insult House Durrandon”

Again, Celtigar shook his head and Drent assumed that he started to realize the danger he got himself into. “It was never meant as an insult, my princess. I beg your forgiveness. I have only repeated Lord Aegon's offer”, he stuttered. Argella's smirk vanished. “Right here, right now, there is no insult that could be worse, Ambassador”, she hissed.

The Storm King patted the ambassador on the back, almost causing him to jump from his chair. Apparently his survival instincts finally started to kick in. “I'm sorry for the way this discussion went, ambassador. I think we should let it rest and just change the topic, what do you think?”, the king growled. Celtigar gave him a hasty nod. “Yes. Y... yes, I agree. This got a bit out of hand and a change of topic will be for the best. Do you have something in mind, your grace?” Durrandon gave him a short laugh. “Swords”, he answered. “Swords, your grace?”, Celtigar asked surprised. Drent had to close his eyes for a moment. This won't end well. There were many bad things to say about Argilac Durrandon, none of them worked in favour of the ambassador. He was irritable, hot-tempered, prideful. There were a lot of good things to say about him as well. He was fair to his men, knew half of Storm's Ends servants by name, cared for them. But his best and worst quality at the same time was that he loved his daughter more than anything else in this world. He wouldn't let that insult go unpunished, regardless of how many dragons Aegon Targaryen had.

“Swords, ambassador. You know them, right? Fascinating things. Sharp, deadly, elegant. I prefer the raw strength of a warhammer, but nonetheless I admire swordplay. Are you a fighter?”, Durrandon asked. Celtigar gave him a proud nod. “Indeed, your grace. I'm not as good as my cousin Gordar, but I clashed swords with Eryas Velaryon and Lord Aegon himself in the tourney at Claw Isle. During the war against the Volantene hegemony, I personally slew one of their commanders in the battle at the fields of Myr”, he explained, his voice booming with pride. Durrandon gave him a nod and turned to Ser Emphryus next to him. “Emphryus here has a fascinating sword. Would you mind taking a look on it, ambassador?”, he asked. Drent sighed again. The ambassador was a dead man, he just failed to realize it. “Of course, your grace!”, he exclaimed. “It will be my honour” It will be his death...

At the Storm kings command, Emphryus drew his sword, laying it into his kings hands. “It's not Valyrian Steel, not comparable to the swords of Lord Aegon or Lady Visenya, but it has been in my family for centuries”, Dresfel explained. “It is called 'The Dessel”

“The Dessel, I see”, the ambassador said and Durrandon moved the blade, holding it only a few inches away from Celtigar's face. Drent saw a drop of sweat running down the ambassadors temple. “A fine blade, but I have to ask... Is that dried blood on it?”

"It is", Dresfel said not without pride. "The blood of lords and kings, of dead houses, the essence of war itself. No Dresfel would ever wield another weapon. The only one I'm willing to hand it to is my king. Everyone else who tries to take it is a dead man"

The drop of sweat reached Celtigar's chin and dropped to the floor. Durrandon growled slightly. "I... I am... haven't you sent for bread and salt about half an hour ago, your grace?", the ambassador asked nervously, his voice slightly cracking. Durrandon gave him a nod. "I thought you Valyrians don't give much about our customs, Ambassador Celtigar", he growled. "Anyway, let's talk again about Lord Aegon's offer"

"Your grace... I... Please... I...", Celtigar stuttered, shivering in fear, looking at the blade right in front of him. "You may not notice it, but what he did is a serious offence. My daughter, my only child and heiress, my wonderful daughter...", the king growled and exchanged a tender look with Argella. "Insulted, almost disgraced, by being offered a bastard..."

"Your grace, please, this is a misunderstanding...", Celtigar pleaded. "Mercy! I am only a messenger" Durrandon's cruel look vanished, replaced by an understanding one. "I know, Ambassador. I bear you no ill will. So, Lord Aegon asked for my daughter's hands in marriage, those were your words, right?" Celtigar gave him a nod. "Yes, your grace, his words. I'm sorry if I have offended you"

Durrandon narrowed his eyes. "Don't be sorry, ambassador. I only intend to send Lord Aegon a simple answer to his offer", he said and Drent saw that the Ambassador made the foolish mistake of relaxing. "And that answer is 'No'", the Storm King whispered. And in a swift movement, almost too quick for Drent to even realize it, he moved the sword downwards, ramming it deep into the table.

For a moment, Ambassador Celtigar was silent, looking at the Storm King in complete and utter shock. Then he raised his arms, revealing bloody stumps where Argilac Durrandon had severed both of his hands slightly above the wrist. And then he started to scream, blood-curling screams of agony as he helplessly watched the place where his hands used to be seconds ago.

"Let this be a...", Durrandon started to shout, but the panicked screams of the ambassador managed to drown even his voice. "Let this...", he tried again, but made a frustrated face as he noticed that he was barely audible. The ambassador's entourage looked in complete shock, while the soldiers had amused looks on their faces. The Storm Princess had a cruel smirk on her face, looking pleased, amused, genuinely happy.

"ONE MORE THING", the Storm King screamed at the top of his lungs, smashing the hilt of his sword into Celtigar's face. The Ambassador fell forwards onto the table, into the pools of blood that flew out of his wrists, knocked unconscious with a single blow. "When the Storm King speaks", Durrandon growled "Lesser men are silent!"

He started to walk around the table, towards the Valyrians, who raised from their chairs, trying to get away from the king. Argilac casually wielded the sword, as if he was simply approaching them as a friend. "Let this be a lesson!", he shouted, his voice now carried all over the hall. "Any man who dares to even think about insulting my daughter won't be a man anymore. The fate of the Ambassador shall be an example of my fury!" Storm King and Storm Princess exchanged a soft look and Argella seemed to be genuinely moved by her father's actions.

The King looked up, eyeing some poor servants, albeit there was no maliciousness in his eyes as he looked at them. "And now fetch me the bloody Maester, we have a wounded man here! I don't want him to bleed to death, I want him to live. He will be my answer to Lord Aegon", he growled, pointing his sword at the Valyrians. "Who is Celtigar's second-in-command?", he asked. No one answered him and Durrandon walked closer. "I said... WHO LEADS YOU, YOU FUCKING PIGS?"

The Valyrians flinched and shivered, tears running down their faces, but finally one of them raised his hand, albeit only slightly, as if he was afraid to lose it. "... I lead them. My name is...", he said, but was cut off by Argilac. "I don't care for your name", he said and grabbed him at the collar of his shirt. "I will tell you what to do...", he said and looked towards the doors that lead to the kitchen. A smile appeared on his face. "Fucking FINALLY!", he shouted. "Bread and Salt, as I promised"

The two servants reappeared, in their hands a bowl of bread and a bowl of salt. Without putting away the sword, Argilac Durrandon grabbed a small loaf of bread, dipped it into the salt and took a bite out of it, while drops of blood fell from the blade onto the floor. "First order: Eat my bread and salt. Nobody shall say that I harm a man who ate my bread and salt" He pointed at the unconscious ambassador. "He wasn't my guest. He spat on our traditions and even worse, he insulted my daughter. But you are a smart man, aren't you?"

The leader of the Valyrians gave him a shaky nod, grabbed a loaf of bread, dipped it into the salt and ate it in one bite. Durrandon's voice was lower now, sounding like a distant thunder. "Good. Very good. Now you are my guests and no harm shall be done to you under my roof", he growled.

"The fate of the ambassador is unfortunate, but I think you all learned a thing today, about respect and how far a father will go to protect the honour of his daughter. My Maester will patch your ambassador up. He's not the best Maester, but he is good enough. I think he might live. As soon as he wakes up, send him my condolences for his loss and my congratulations for the learned lesson" These words caused laughter among the soldiers and Drent caught Sergeant Montclair chuckling. Princess Argella threw her head back and laughed brightly.

“As soon as my Maester is finished patching him up, you will leave Storm's End and you will never return. Take the Ambassador with you and even more important, take all of him with you”, King Argilac proclaimed. “Tell Lord Aegon, these will be the only hands he will receive from me” The Valyrian was quick to give him a nod, almost too quick, as tears of fear ran down his face. Durrandon took a deep breath. “I think you pissed yourself”, he said with a chuckle, causing another outburst of laughter from his man. “But luckily, I don't see a bit of piss on my floor as an insult” He smiled, almost genuinely this time, as the leader of the Valyrians went pale and took a step back. “I am sorry, your grace. Please, accept my apology!”, he stuttered and Drent saw a dark, wet spot in his trousers.

“Ah, Seven Hells, do you have to apologize for everything? Relax a bit, you are my guest now. Are you afraid I could use this sword against you?”, Durrandon asked. The Valyrian shook his head after a while, unsure what he should answer. “No... No, I think you honour the guest right. You said you won't harm me and you are a man of your word”, he said meekly. Durrandon patted him on the shoulder, causing him to flinch. “Now, that is a smart little Valyrian. Why aren't you the ambassador?”

He turned to Dresfel again, putting the bloody sword on the table in front of him. “Thank you, my friend, for lending me your weapon. It is a fine sword, take good care of it”, he said. Dresfel gave him a nod. “You honour me, your grace. I believe, the Dessel never tasted valyrian blood before”, he answered with pride in his voice.

“Well there's always a first time”, Durrandon proclaimed and looked at his daughter, who had raised from her chair. “Dear father, now that the Valyrians are our guests, why don't we give them exactly the hospitality they deserve? I think we have a few relatives of them here at Storm's End!”, she proclaimed. The Storm King's face showed a bright smile as he apparently understood what his daughter meant.

“The pigs in the pens of Storm's End don't have this ridiculous silver hair of the pigs you lie with on Dragonstone”, Argella said with a mocking smile as she looked at the Valyrians. “But I'm sure you'll get along just fine. While you wait for the Maester to save the poor ambassador's life, I'm sure you'll find their presence entertaining” She looked at her father. “After all, no one should say that the Durrandon's are bad hosts”

Argilac laughed as he heard this, but his laugh soon stopped as he looked at the still bleeding and unconscious ambassador. “My daughter is right. The pigpens for you, mylords!”, he shouted. “But I have one question, a very important question and I demand an answer *now*! I ask you, WHERE IS THE FUCKING MAESTER?”

He looked towards Drent and Montclair. For a moment, Drent was afraid to see maliciousness in the king's eyes, but instead he saw the same look his father often gave him, stern, but caring.

“You two! One of you shall fetch the bloody maester, to save this poor idiots life. The other one

shall escort the Valyrians to their guest rooms in the pigpen. I don't care who of you wants to do what, but I don't want to wait!"

Montclair gave Drent an alarmed look and took a step towards him. "He's right, you know? I don't think the king wants to wait in his current temper. So, you get to choose, Golton. I really don't care what I should do, I'll leave it up to you", he said.

[Escort the Valyrian's to the pigpen]

Samantha

Staying or leaving? Well, it was not as if she had any lead where to find Lunett. She might as well stay around for a while, this Jaylon looked like a well-connected man at least. No, that was lie. Technically he hardly looked like a man at all, with his huge head and and his pathetic excuse of a beard. But he looked like a grumkin who was working for a well-connected man. She leant back and gave Jaylon her brightest smile. "Hey, I have nothing to do right now", she said. "What are we talking about?" Sasha gave her a short glare and shook her head. "You should have left, girl", she mumbled. Jaylon on the other hand seemed to be pleased. "Good. That's good. I came to hire one mercenary. Looks like I get two", he said. Sasha looked at her Arakh that still lay on the table. "Or none", she answered and glared at him. "What do you want?"

Jaylon moved his hand towards the hilt of his sword and Samantha noticed that Sasha immediately grabbed the hilt of her Arakh. But instead of drawing his weapon, the man instead grabbed a small purse and threw it on the table. It tinkled as it hit the wood.

"That could be your first monthly payment", he said. Sasha put the hand away from her sword, but still didn't seem to relax in the presence of this man. "And why do you feel the need to hire me? You know I fight best on horseback. Have the Solvers decided to bless the countryside with their stinking presence or is your master now dumb enough to use cavalry in a city?", Sasha asked.

This caused Samantha to listen up. "You're a rider?", she asked in surprise. Sasha gave her a reluctant nod. "The best you'll find from here to Vaes Dothrak", she proclaimed, causing Samantha to chuckle. "That remains to be seen. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty good too" Sasha gave her a cold glare. "You were born in the saddle?", she asked. Samantha shook her head. "But I was trained under...", she said but Sasha cut her off. "Well, I was", she simply answered. "So don't talk about things you have no idea off"

Samantha shook her head. "Okay, no need to be an ass about this", she said and Sasha opened her mouth to answer something, probably something rude. Jaylon cut her off by raising both of his hands, causing her to shift her attention immediately back to him and to her Arakh. "Ladies, please", he said. "As much as I enjoy seeing such lovely young women fighting, I don't have the time for it. I'm here to discuss business, simple as that" He gave Sasha an ugly smile. "As always, your input is smart and much appreciated", he said.

Sasha only gave him a glare. "Come on, Jaylon", she said. "I think we're both smarter than that. I don't appreciate sweet talk, you don't appreciate sweet talk and your boss sure as hell does not appreciate sweet talk. Let's talk open, from woman to dog. Why do you want to hire me?" She looked at Samantha. "And her... why are you so willing to hire a newcomer, someone you've never seen performing?"

Jaylon leant forward, carefully eyeing Sasha, but even more carefully eyeing her sword. "Now you're asking the good questions. Yes, we can agree to be completely open here. We don't want to loose someone with your skills, or with any skills at all, not to the Burned Man", he explained and Samantha started to listen more carefully. Who was this Burned Man? At least the name didn't help her in finding any sympathy for him.

"And because of this, we're going to hire every single mercenary in this whole fucking city. The war is nearing it's end, Sasha. Soon, the Burned Man will be dead. The city will be at peace and all will be well", he said, albeit he didn't sound too enthusiastically as he said this.

Sasha chuckled slightly and shook her head. "Come on, Jaylon. Spare me your idealistic horseshit. We both know you're only in this for the money he's paying you. I mean, are you seriously believing this pile of shit? I doubt anything will be well when you won. I doubt anything would change"

Jaylon shrugged. "His words. Not mine. He believes in them. He believes in the righteousness of his cause", he said. Sasha narrowed her eyes and seemed to force herself to a smile. "Well yeah, I'm sure he believes in that. Sadly, I'm afraid I have to decline every offer you could ever make, even if you'd promise me this whole fucking city. I'm just not that much into the raping and mutilating of minors as some of your people"

This caused Samantha to give her a surprised look. "Wait, what?", she stuttered. "What kind of group are we talking about?", she asked with suspicion in her voice. So far this seemed like a normal recruiting talk, but the stuff about raping and mutilating usually wasn't part of a normal conversation, at least outside of Qohor. What kind of hellhole was she about to enter?

Jaylon sighed. "You're really new here, aren't you, sweetie?", he asked and Samantha narrowed her eyes. "Call me sweetie one more time and your face will meet my axe", she snarled and saw that Sasha smirked as she heard this. Jaylon quickly raised his hands. "I meant no offence", he

said with a surprised tone in his voice. "Just made a statement. You are new in this city, right?" Samantha gave him a nod.

"Well, in this city there are two major groups fighting for control. Three if you count the city guard, but they are mostly harmless despite that bloodhound Mullendore leading them. One of these groups is the Burned Man. A complete monster, ruthless, calculating and scheming, an evil old cripple who is a bit too much into children, if you get what I mean", Jaylon explained. He chuckled and Sasha shook his head. "And your boss is bathing in the blood of baby dragons to regain his youth", she hissed. "If I recall, we promised to spare each other this kind of propaganda"

She looked at Samantha. "Like Jaylon said, two groups of criminals. The Burned Man and Butterfly", she said and hearing the name of the man she was hunting caused Samantha to barely suppress a startled glare. Sasha seemed to notice it, but didn't comment on it. "The Burned Man is bad, someone I wouldn't work for, but some of the stuff Butterfly is into is bad enough to make me sick", she said

Samantha gave her a nod. "I've heard that much", she said and failed to hide the bleakness in her cracking voice. Sasha and Jaylon gave her curious looks, as Samantha felt rage inside of her. She gave Jaylon a furious glare. "And you're working for that Butterfly?", she asked a bit too angry. Jaylon gave her a slight nod and raised from his chair. "I believe none of you is interested in making a lot of money?", he asked, a bit sheepish now that Samantha put her hands on the hatchets at her belt.

Sasha slightly clapped her hands. "Once again you prove that you're not very fast, Jaylon. You know my reasons. And I believe you don't want to know her reasons", she hissed. "Now leave, as long as you still have balls"

"You're not going anywhere", Samantha growled, finally drawing one of her hatchets, pointing it at him as discreetly as possible. "You're going to lead me to the Butterfly, or I will kill you" To her surprise, Jaylon gave her an ugly smile instead of looking scared. "Try it, sweetie, and I will kill you. I might be wounded, but I am not a bad fighter. And if you attack me...", he whispered and took a small look around, his smile getting wider.

Sasha followed his eyes, closing her own after a while. "How many people in here are working for you?", she asked. Jaylon gave her his most disgusting smile. "Not all of them, but enough", he answered. Sasha sighed. "Let him go, Samantha", she ordered. The authoritative tone in her voice caused Samantha indeed to lower her weapon.

"What?", she asked. She knew, Sasha had a good reason, but right now she felt six years of suppressed anger coming up. She was close, so close. The man who ordered her families death was here, so close. Butterfly, Butterfly... She closed her eyes and blinked a tear away.

“Go”, she spat and Jaylon gave her a confused look. “Don't stand around like that you ugly motherfucker. I said, GO!” She didn't need to say it again. He gave Sasha a nod. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me. Don't bring her though, she seems to have a grudge against Butterfly”

Sasha slightly smirked. “You think so?”, she asked. “Perhaps I have a grudge on him too, just not a personal one. Neither of us will work for Butterfly. It will never happen. And now go away” Jaylon gave her a reluctant nod and moved his hand towards the purse of gold on front of her, but stopped as Samantha pointed the hatchet at his forearm, ready to strike. “Leave the gold”, she snarled. Jaylon gave her another confused look. “Excuse me, but what?”, he asked.

She looked him straight in the eyes. “You heard me. Leave. The gold”, she growled with barely concealed rage. Jaylon chuckled. “Come on, girl. That's Butterfly's gold”, he said. She gave him a nod. “Exactly. That's why I'll take it from him”

Jaylon shook his head. “Come on, don't be stupid sweetie. That's not enough to die for”, he said. “Is it enough to buy you a new hand?”, Samantha asked. He narrowed his eyes. “If you force me to leave this tiny purse of money just because you think you can kick Butterfly in the nuts by doing so, you're making a terrible mistake”

“Perhaps”, she answered. “Perhaps I don't care. I've listened to your fucking talk. I held back. I held back for six fucking years. And now I'm done with that. I won't hold back anymore. Tell Butterfly, that purse is the first of many things I'm going to take from him”

Jaylon's smile vanished. “Messing with Butterfly is suicide, girl. Think again. Pick the wise choice”, he urged her, but he seemed to be a bit meek now as he noticed she wasn't joking. Part of Samantha wanted to cut off his head right now, but she knew she wouldn't leave the tavern alive if Jaylon would die here. But perhaps she could at least take his gold. It wouldn't be much but it would be a start.

[Force him to leave the money]

Willfred

Much to Tallian's joy, Willfred had decided to choose the way to Raylansfair without splitting up. At least Willfred assumed the general was pleased, since he didn't protest against his decision. For hours, they followed the weak trail four men had left on the dirty road. In the meantime, the sun started to set, bathing the landscape in red. The direction they were heading to was sunny, but behind them, Willfred noticed dark clouds moving in their direction. There would be rain soon.

"You think he's alive?", Willfred asked the general, who was still riding next to him. Tallian did not answer at first, just staring at the road in front of him. He finally let out a sigh after a few moments. "Your uncle Roger is a special man", he said. "And I hold him in high regards. He has morals, but to achieve his goals he is more than willing to be pragmatic. And he has a sense of justice and duty which I miss in most of the Rock's noblemen"

"That was not an answer", Willfred stated and Tallian shook his head. "No, it wasn't", he answered. "I don't think that a man like Roger could die from a group of marauders. He's not the kind of man to die unceremoniously in some remote backcountry and he's not the kind of man to die as a frail old man" He slightly smiled. "No, I think Roger is the kind of man who will die charging at the enemy, staring down his killer, a battlecry on his lips. He's still alive"

This slightly pleased Willfred and he let out a sigh of relief. "How do you wish to die?", he asked, as the thought flashed through his mind. Again, Tallian did not answer at first. "I'm not someone who fights for glory", he answered. "I'd like to die peaceful, without pain. Preferably a natural death at an old age, or at least a quick one. And you?"

"Protecting the ones I love", Willfred answered immediately. He had thought about this for a while now, ever since he got wounded in the small skirmish a few days ago. Luckily, the axe merely gave him a few bruises and his back was almost fully healed already, but he could have easily broken his spine. It would have been a terribly senseless and pathetic death. "I'd like to die a meaningful death, one of those that are sung in legends, to protect the ones I love"

Tallian chuckled slightly and Willfred narrowed his eyes. "Do you think this is laughable?", he asked and the general shook his head. "Not at all. But that's exactly what Roger would have answered. You have a lot in common. A sense of justice, upholding the ideals of chivalry, a rocky relationship with Darren Reyne..."

"Leave my father out of this!", Willfred said quickly. "That was unnecessary" Tallian shook his head. "But it might help you in bonding with your uncle. It is true, right? Your father does not approve of most of your decisions"

As Willfred did not answer, the general continued. "That's not a bad thing. A father is not all-knowing. Mine treated me like dirt until I ran away from home and look at me now. A general of the Rock's armies"

"My father does not treat me like dirt", Willfred answered. "It's just..." "Complicated", Tallian completed his sentence and Willfred gave him a nod without looking away from the road. "Yeah. Complicated. He disapproves of my actions, I disapprove of his views. Thinking about it, it's a wonder you two get along that badly. After all, you seem to disapprove of everything I do too" Tallian shook his head. "That's true. I disapprove of most of your actions, because they are reckless. Your father on the other hand is too overcautious and his view on the war could cause

serious harm to the kingdom if he chooses to withdraw his troops. I prefer a middle way between these two", he said.

"And what if there is no middle way?", Willfred asked. "What if you are forced to choose, between my father's view and mine?" Again, Tallian was silent for a moment. "If there is no middle way", he said. "I'll make one"

They stopped the same moment as the soldier in front of them stopped. "What is it?", Tallian snarled. The soldier pointed at the distance. "A building. Perhaps a larger farmhouse, or a small inn", he said.

"Both would be a good hideout for fleeing bandits. You see any horses?", the general asked. The soldier shook his head. "A small stable", he answered. Tallian slowly patted his belly. "An inn would be welcomed. I could use something to eat. And perhaps we'll even find Roger"

As they rode closer towards the building, Willfred realized that it was indeed an inn, albeit a shabby one, barely different than a farmhouse. Sudden movement in the bushes next to him startled him and he stopped his horse. The soldiers seem to notice it too, as they stopped almost simultaneously, pointing their pikes at two men who walked onto the road. They had darker skin than most Westerosi, except perhaps the Dornish. They were armed, one of them with a long sword, the other with a bow, albeit they weren't pointing them at the soldiers.

The man with the sword had very dark skin, similar to the sandy Dornishmen of the desert areas of Dorne. He was wearing a blackened armour over his large and muscular body, but no helmet, showing very short, curly hair and a lean, but strong face. Dark brown eyes carefully watched them, but he showed no hostility.

The other man, the one with the bow, held the weapon in his hand, but kept his arrows in a quiver at the side of his body. He was a bit shorter and his skin was a bit lighter, similar to the olive skin of the stony Dornishmen of the coastline. He had a handsome face and bright green eyes, his dark hair swept back behind his ears.

As the men approached the soldiers, the archer made a short bow, while the swordsman looked sternly, clenching his teeth. "Greetings", the archer said. "What leads a band of soldiers into these remote area? You misplaced your war?"

"I'Lian...", the swordsman hissed with a gentle voice. "Not a good time" The archer gave him a short nod, before looking at Willfred and his soldiers again. "Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. My name is I'Lian. This grumpy giant next to me is my brother Jaro. May I ask your names?"

"You may", Tallian answered. "But you won't receive an answer. And now get out of our way"

The archer narrowed his eyes. "How rude. You are not from here, right? The people here are shockingly polite"

"What gave us away?", Willfred asked. "His manners or the colour of our tabards?" He gave them the hint of a nod, albeit he remained cautious. These men seemed to be alone, but he wouldn't be too surprised if they would have a dozen men in the surrounding bushes, ready to ambush them. A highborn hostage like him and an influential man like Vashord Tallian would be every highwayman's wet dream. "We are not from here and we don't intend to stay. We're looking for someone"

"Aren't we all?", I'Lian said with a smile. "I'm pretty sure you're going to find someone in this area, but I'm afraid I have to ask you, do you intend to enter that inn in your search?"

"Quite possible", Tallian growled, putting a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Do you intend to stop us?" I'Lian shook his head. "Not with force", he said. "We are no match for a dozen soldiers. But perhaps you're open for reason"

"I'Lian", the swordsman, Jaro, hissed, looking at the soldiers. "Excuse my brother. He has a habit of talking too much. We are sellswords, on our way to the city of Raylansfair, where we want to meet a few friends" He paused, looking towards the inn behind them. "Unfortunately we were stopped from meeting up with them a few days ago, when we met a man"

"A man?", Tallian asked with suspicion in his voice. "Aye", I'Lian answered. "Someone" Jaro sighed and shook his head. "Ser Roger Hill", he explained and his face formed a slight smile, the first emotion besides his stoic expression Willfred saw from him. He noticed that he was smiling at him. "I saw your reaction. He's the someone you're looking for, am I right?"

Willfred gave him a nod. "I'm not a good liar", he said. "Yes, we are looking for him. Where is he?" Now it was up to I'Lian to give him a suspicious look. "Why?", he asked. "Why are you looking for him?"

"We're friends", Tallian answered immediately and truthfully. "Looking for him in a matter of our own business. But rest assured, it is nothing that would harm him" I'Lian shook his head. "Let me be the judge of that", he answered. "You are planning to enter that inn, right?"

Willfred gave him a nod. "Indeed. Does it matter?" Jaro took a step forwards, but stopped as the soldiers pointed their pikes at him. "Easy now", he said. "We are no enemies. We travelled with Roger, chased these bandits with him. He ordered us to prevent anyone from entering that inn, at least directly. He said he has a plan and that it would be dangerous for anyone to use the front door"

He looked towards the inn. "That was half an hour ago. Nobody left the inn since then. And nobody noticed us. Listen, I know you have no reason to trust us, but if Roger is your friend, you shouldn't go against his wishes. Come with us through the backdoor" He pointed at Willfred and Tallian. "You and you, I would say. Too many soldiers could draw attention and put Roger at risk. Alternatively you could storm the building, albeit this could be dangerous for you, your men and for Roger. We can't stop you, it's your decision"

Willfred and Tallian looked at each other. "Do you trust them?", Willfred asked. Tallian shook his head. "Not at all", he snarled. "They know Roger, but that doesn't prove anything" He sighed. "But if the past weeks proved one thing, then it's the fact that I'm not the one giving the orders here. Do what you want, boy"

[Storm the inn]

Torvin

For a moment, Torvin was about to grab the bow out of Hjalgar's shaking hands. But he saw the look in Harmund's eyes. The prince wasn't in a mood for such insubordination. He was only looking for an excuse to spill some blood. The captured man on the other hand was still crying, desperately praying to the Seven to save him.

"Come on, Hjalgar", Torvin tried to encourage the boy. "You can do it! It's not different from shooting at an animal" The frightening glare of Harmund Hoare shifted from Hjalgar to him and Torvin would have shivered, if it wasn't for his desperate attempts to suppress the urge to attack this dark-eyed son of a whore. His hands were shaking, but he managed to look him in the eyes, until Harmund got bored.

Hjalgar on the other hand gave him a frightened stare. "You... you're lying", he said. "It's nothing like shooting at animals. Animals don't beg for mercy, animals don't cry and they don't..." He stopped as Harmund growled something unintelligible, causing the boy to shiver.

"You are pathetic", Rell said, looking at Hjalgar. "Your father should have drowned you as soon as you left your mothers womb" This time, Torvin saw something else in Hjalgar's eyes. The fear started to disappear, replaced by rage. And then Torvin realized how he could motivate the boy. "Rell speaks the truth", he said, causing surprised looks from Hjalgar, Rell and Harlan. Harmund on the other hand shifted his attention back at him, looking curious, albeit the bloodthirsty look in his eyes only intensified. "What have you said?", Hjalgar asked, his voice slightly cracking.

"You heard me", Torvin answered. "You are pathetic. A weak excuse for an Ironborn. Even Gabin here has more iron inside of him and he's a fucking fish" As he said that, he saw a hurt look in Gabin's eyes. It did not matter. He wasn't here to make friends.

"Your father should have drowned your mother as soon as she became pregnant with you", he continued, noticing a smirk on Rell's face. Harmund on the other hand wasn't smirking. The bright flames of the hunting parties torches reflected in his dark eyes. Torvin gulped before he continued "He would have done this world a favour", he growled

This caused Hjalgar to scream in rage Before Torvin could react, he had shot an arrow at the captured man, hitting him right in the face, impaling his left eye. The man sank to the ground,

immediately dead. Torvin had seen worse deaths. The man would have been thankful that it had been Hjalgar who killed him and not Harmund Hoare.

"Finally", the prince snarled with a low voice. "It was about time" He grabbed Hjalgar at the shoulders. The boy seemed to be too shocked about himself to be scared. "If I ever order you to do something again, do it immediately"

He let go of Hjalgar, who was approached by Gabin, and instead walked closer towards Torvin. "Is anything the matter, my prince?", Torvin asked, ignoring his shivering hands. He had a knife. It would be easy. "You think you're so fucking smart", Harmund growled. "Provoking that boy until he snaps. And nobody noticed it, not even Rell. They all respect him now, even though he deserves no respect"

The prince's hand moved to an elegant dagger strapped to his belt and Torvin noticed that his heart started to beat faster. "You think you're so clever...", Harmund growled as he moved closer, speaking almost tender, but undeniably bloodthirsty. "Perhaps I should end you right here, gut you like a pig, to show them what happens to little cunts who don't know their place. How would you like that? Not so clever now, are you?"

Torvin was about to answer, when another voice caught his attention. "Harmund!", Harlan shouted, walking towards them. "Leave him be, brother. Has he angered you?" Harmund took a step back and Torvin noticed that he held the dagger in his hands now. "Not as much as you have", he growled.

Harlan gulped, his eyes shifting to Torvin, signalling him to move away from them. "A lovely night, isn't it?" Harmund did not answer, at least not with words. In a swift movement, he slammed his fist into Harlan's face, sending his brother to the ground. Torvin felt a strange relief as he noticed that it wasn't the fist that held the dagger. "It is", Harmund said with a smirk on his lips. "And now get up on your feet, you worthless bastard. That was an order!"

Harlan almost jumped to his feet, blood flowing out of his nose. For a moment, Torvin almost felt pity for him. No one, no matter how awful, deserved to be Harmund Hoare's younger brother. And now he had a good idea how Harlan had turned into the psychopath he was today. The younger prince forced himself to smile. "Yes! Thank you, brother!", he said, albeit his voice shivered in fear as he noticed that Harmund was still holding the dagger in his hands.

"And now go, search your little bitch. Get out of my eyes before I get angry", Harmund growled, turning around to his men. "To the horses! We've wasted enough time here!", he shouted as he was walking towards his horse. His loyal dogs started to walk after him, their snouts still stained with blood.

Harlan turned towards Torvin, Gabin and Hjalgar, wiping his still bleeding nose. "Fuck, fuck, fucking Harmund...", he mumbled as soon as the hunting party started to move away, albeit he seemed to be careful enough not to speak too loudly. Even now, Torvin saw the fear in his eyes.

"Prince Harlan", he said, feeling the need to say anything. Gabin and Hjalgar stayed silent. The boy still seemed to be shocked by his own actions and Gabin comforted him. Harlan's attention shifted towards him and the look in his eyes was murderous. "I...", Torvin stuttered. "Thank you. Harmund was about to..."

"Shut up...", Harlan growled with a sullen voice. "Just, shut the fuck up!" He looked towards the hunting party in the distance. "I know what he was about to do. Trust me, I know exactly what he is capable of"

He walked closer towards Torvin, clenching his fists. "Fuck Harmund", he growled and before Torvin could react, Harlan delivered a punch to his stomach, sending him to the ground. The punch wasn't that strong, but Torvin felt obliged to fall to the ground, in an attempt to please Harlan. He wasn't in the mood to beat a prince up right now. He was in a mood to kill a prince, but not this prince.

"And fuck you!" Harlan's voice got louder now. "For now he'll find some whores to torment, but when he's back at Harrenhal who do you think has to endure his bad mood? Fuck! You! For provoking him!" He stopped for a moment, breathing heavily. "You think you got it bad from him? Try to be his younger brother! Try to be Harren fucking Hoare's secondborn fucking son for a single fucking day!" With these words, he let out a scream full of rage and violently kicked Torvin in the side, pressing the air out of his lungs.

Immediately after he kicked him, Torvin rolled to his back, coughing. This time, it was no act. The kick was hard, the pain in his ribs severe and he hoped that nothing was broken. He saw Harlan breathing heavily, sending him a murderous glare. However, the prince closed his eyes and as he opened them again, Torvin saw regret.

"Fuck...", he mumbled, reaching down to pull Torvin back up on his feet. Torvin let out a pained grunt as Harlan patted him on his back, carefully avoiding to touch his ribs. "Fuck, I didn't want to do it, not that hard", he mumbled. "It's just... Harmund has this effect on me, on everyone. But especially on me. Are we... I mean... Sorry?", he asked and Torvin gave him a nod. This was not the time to antagonize Harlan. His time would come, eventually. "There's no need to apologize", Torvin answered.

Harlan gave him a visibly forced smile. "Liar", he mumbled, turning towards the forest. "This was supposed to be a lovely night, but my brother had to fuck it up again. As always..." He sighed. "But perhaps there'll be some fun after all. A good hunt, just the thing I need right now" He grinned as he looked back at Torvin. "Let's hope that bitch gives us some good sport. Let's hope we can make her pay!"

As they walked into the forest, Torvin asked himself how exactly they should find a girl, especially one that was clever enough not to go to that death trap of a farm. Harmund had left them no hounds and no expert trackers. Of course, there was Hjalgar, but Torvin had no doubt

that the boy would do anything to prevent finding the girls trail. And then he realized, Harmund never wanted them to find the girl, he just wanted to get his brother out of the way. And as he looked back at Harlan, he noticed that the younger prince seemed to start realizing this too. "He gave us no hounds...", Harlan mumbled. "Fuck..." Immediately after he said this, he looked up, alarmed, towards the rest of his group. "Don't tell him!", he urged them and for a moment his voice sounded irrationally panicked.

"We won't, my prince", Gabin said softly, with routine in his voice. "But it is true", Harlan mumbled. "He gave us no hounds. We will never find this girl, not if she's good at hiding" He looked up, towards Torvin and for a moment, his eyes showed something resembling respect. "What... what should we do?", he asked.

"Are you valuing my opinion over your own, my prince?", Torvin asked surprised. Harlan shook his head. "Of course not!", he hissed. "But... but a good prince listens to the advice of his friends, right?" He looked at Torvin, anticipating a decision. Torvin knew, inside of this nightly forest they had close to no chances of finding the girl. And he didn't really want to find her, just so that she could amuse Harlan in the last painful moments of her life. Perhaps returning to Harrenhal would be the best for their small group. Harmund wouldn't be too thrilled about this, sure. But Torvin was certain that Harmund wouldn't be too thrilled about anything they could do right now. It was all just a question how much he was willing to go against the wishes of a man who has horrible enough to make his monster of a younger brother look like a pitiable wimp in comparison.

[Advise him to continue the hunt]

Ellena

"I agree. Give me the letter and Terroma will get it tonight", Ellena said. The Burned Man gave her a slow, pleased nod, his mouth forming a warm smile. "That is the right decision", he answered. "I know, you don't trust me and you have all the right not to do it. I don't expect people to trust me. But this is beneficial for all of us. For me, for Terroma, perhaps ultimately even for you. If we can put our mistrust aside and work together, we can achieve great things" He leant forwards, intensely staring at Ellena out of his dark brown eyes. "That's all I ask for", he said, his deep voice sounding calm and reassuring.

If it weren't for the circumstances and if it weren't for his occupation, Ellena realized that she could have liked him. He had something warm and pleasant inside of him, something almost fatherly. But his friendliness was uncomfortably out of place every time she remembered what kind of man he was. The fact that he was the lesser evil in this city was unsettling.

“And my friends will be protected?”, she asked. The Burned Man gave her a nod. “I swear it. And I stay true to my word, always”, he answered. Something in his voice made Ellena believe him. Perhaps she just wanted to believe him for once.

“And this letter? What are his contents?”, she asked. The Burned Man sighed. “You can read it if you must. I advise you against it, since it involves details you might regret to learn”, he answered. “But it mainly involves information about Butterfly and his associates, the little things I know at least”

Before he could elaborate on this, they got interrupted as the door was opened again. Harpy entered the room and from what Ellena saw, her serene facial expression was gone. Instead, she looked all churned up, barely looking at Ellena, focusing her stare on the Burned Man.

“We have to talk”, she said, the Ghiscari accent in her voice sounding stronger than before, just as her voice sounded more worried. “Now” The Burned Man gave her a tender look, before looking back at Ellena. “I'm afraid we have to postpone this meeting, Ellena”, he said immediately. “Could you do me the honour of waiting until I have talked to Harpy?”

Ellena stood up from her chair and shrugged. “Not like I have a choice, right?”, she asked. The Burned Man smirked as he heard this and shook his head. “I'm afraid not. I'll write the letter for Terrorma and will give it to you as soon as you want to leave”

“The sooner the better”, Ellena mumbled, causing a short glare from Harpy and an almost amused look from the Burned Man. The girl leant down to Ellena, softly grabbing her shoulders. “Listen, we have a few guests right now in the entrance hall. You know one of them”, she said and a short smile flashed across her face. “Your friend, Jaron”

“Jaron is here?”, Ellena asked baffled. “But I thought he...” She smiled. Suddenly this mansion didn't seem so hostile to her anymore. “I'll talk to him!”, she said enthusiastically. Harpy gave her a nod, pulling her hands away from Ellena's shoulder. “The other two are Martin and Robb. Martin can be a pain in the ass, but he is alright. Keep an eye on Robb though. He's... a bit complicated”, she advised her, before looking up to the Burned Man. “And he is one of the reasons why we have to talk”

The Burned Man nodded at Ellena and she understood. “I'll be waiting in the entrance hall”, she said, moving out of the room. She closed the door behind her and noticed that it was noticeably colder in the hallway than it was inside of the Burned Man's room. For a moment, she was tempted to eavesdrop, but any hope of catching some snippets of the conversation was immediately destroyed as she heard Harpy quickly talking in the guttural, outlandish language of the Ghiscari, a language she barely understood when spoken slowly and not through a door. Frustrated, she turned around, walking down the dark hallway towards the brightly illuminated entrance hall.

“Or maybe you see the truth in what I say. We started the same way in this city. We have a lot in common, *Ser Bastard*”, a man snarled as Ellena entered the room. She saw Jaron, who had his back turned to her, holding a raggedy looking man with an unkempt black beard, his good arm raised to a punch. Next to him stood a tall and handsome man with brown hair who was also the first to notice her. He opened his mouth, the same moment as Jaron pushed the other man back into his chair. “You're not worth it”, he growled.

“Knew you'd show some common sense, *Ser Bastard*”, the man said with an infuriating smile as his glance fell on Ellena. “Or perhaps you're one of those people who refuse to hit others when children are watching” With these words, he gave Ellena a cold stare and she responded by narrowing her eyes.

Jaron turned around and she saw the surprise in his face. “Ellena? What are you...”, he said, but didn't manage to continue, as she ran towards him to hug him. She remembered too late that his ribs were still far from being healed, as he let out a pained grunt. Nonetheless, he reciprocated the hug and for a short moment, Ellena felt happy to have a friend here.

“What are you doing here, Ellena?”, Jaron said gently pushing her away. The man behind him, the man Jaron had almost beaten up, formed a wide grin with his ugly mouth, revealing crooked teeth. “Looks like the Burned Man found a new kid to do his dirty work”, he said. Before Jaron or Ellena could answer anything, the third man cleared his throat. “Fuck off, Robb”, he said. “Or else I'll finish what I started”

“Martin...”, Jaron said swiftly, before looking back at Ellena. “What are you doing here? I thought you were at the Princess” She gave him a nod. “I was”, she explained. “Until these disgusting men came. Samuel and Jaylon and... and a third one” Seven Hells, she didn't even know his name! She had killed him and never even cared for his name...

“Samuel wounded the captain and when Moreo tried to intervene he... he...”, she said and closed her eyes for a moment. She still had Moreo's knife with her, resting at her belt. Jaron's gaze fell upon it and she saw the sadness in his eyes. “They wanted to take me and Talea back to their boss, this Butterfly”, she continued. “I tried to run away and...” She stopped as the memories of her stabbing the third man flashed through her. “They tried to stop me. They failed. Two men, Bakr and this creep Abbas helped me, they chased them off”

“So they have been useful after all...”, Jaron said. “Never thought I'd be happy about Abbas' presence in this city” Ellena shook her head. “I don't like him”, she said. “Bakr is alright, I guess, but Abbas is...” She stopped as she remembered where she was and who Abbas was working for. “The Burned Man offered protection for the crew”, she continued to explain. “And I agreed to do him a favour”

She realized that she had said something wrong as she saw a moment of anger in Jaron's usually calm face. “A favour?”, he hissed. “You are a child! And he is a....” He paused for a

moment, glaring at the man he had almost beaten up. "Don't you even dare to say a single word now!" The anger in his voice came as a complete shock for Ellena.

"I'm not a child anymore", Ellena answered quickly, in an attempt to calm him down. "I'm almost thirteen! Besides, it's only a small favour, I'm not working for him. A one-time deal and it also favours Terroma"

"Terroma!", Jaron said, apparently just remembering that the old man had been in similar danger. "What happened to him?" Ellena looked to the other men and waited for a moment before responding. "He escaped, of course. Albeit I wished he would have stayed. He would have killed these men", she said and the sharp tone in her voice surprised her. "He is hiding in the city. I know the place. And that's why the Burned Man wants me to deliver a letter to him, detailing information about Butterfly"

"And when do you intend to leave?", Jaron asked. "Do you want to stay the night here?" She shook her head. "Not if I can prevent it. The sooner I get this over with the better. I'll leave as soon as the Burned Man has finished the letter and intend to deliver it on my way back"

This caused Jaron to give the third man an alarmed glare. "Seven Hells...", he mumbled. "You can't be serious! Walking through this city at night is dangerous enough for me! That's too dangerous for you" Ellena shook her head. "I'm smaller than you. I'm faster than you. And I don't intend to stay any longer here than I have to"

Jaron let out a sigh. "You're stubborn, you know that?", he said and gave her a defeated smile. She smirked at him. "Never heard that one before", she chuckled. "Still... it's dangerous out there", Jaron urged her. "Please, stay the night" She shook her head. "No chance", she answered. The earlier she left this place behind the better!

The third man, who had barely spoken so far, finally joined the conversation. He gave Ellena a friendly smile. "Eh, Jaron", he said. "I could go with her. I know this city like no other and no one will dare to attack me" He looked at Ellena. "My name is Martin. I could protect you, so that our brave knight can sleep well tonight. What do you say?"

She mustered him from head to toe. He really looked like an experienced warrior, a man she would feel save with as long as he was around. And she knew how dangerous this city was. On the other hand, he was working for the Burned Man. If she accepted his help, this would also mean leading him right to Terroma's hideout and who knew what the Burned Man had planned for her friend...

[Accept Martin's help]

Richard

"A toast", Philip proclaimed, raising his jug. "To Richard Harking, back from the dead!" Urid raised his jug, a bit of beer swashing over the table. "To Richard!", he shouted. "To Richard!", Alan joined in, albeit he sounded less enthusiastically. Ilish had almost thrown him out of the tavern when Richard arrived and it needed a lot of convincing to allow him to stay. Even now, the barmaid gave him an angry glare whenever she passed the table, clearly looking for an excuse to throw Alan out of the tavern.

Lyria and Rosalie were sitting opposite of Richard and while he was glad that both of them came, Lyria felt visibly uncomfortable, while Rosalie was easily distracted by this place and especially by Philip. Richard knew, the girl had a huge crush on his friend, while he was too courteous to take advantage of that. Both of them were drinking water and Ilish had given them a surprised look as they ordered it.

And then there was Jenna... Richard's heart broke, seeing her like that. She had always been timid and frail-looking, but she looked horribly out of place in the tavern. She had insisted on drinking a beer, but from her facial expression, Richard could tell that she was disgusted by its taste. And she was silent, more silent than ever, simply focusing on the part of the table directly in front of her. And there they were, his two best friends, his bloody brother, a reluctantly helping blacksmith and her gossipy daughter, he himself, with his wounded leg and his wounded arm and his daughter, who had suffered more than she was able to admit. And together they were up against the most dangerous man he had ever seen.

"So, Richard...", Lyria said, causing him to look up to her. "What exactly is the plan?" She looked around. "Surely you haven't come here simply to celebrate, right?" Richard gave her a nod.

"Right, the plan...", he said, before he was interrupted by Alan. His brother had spent half of his day at this tavern already, drinking ale and unsuccessfully flirting with the barmaid. "You should calm down, lady", he said. "That man here was basically dead for a week, give him some rest" He raised his jug. "To Richard!", he shouted, loud enough to cause several people around them to look at them curiously.

Richard sighed as he watched his brother. "Of course we're not here to celebrate. Not as long as Wolfius is still out there", he answered to Lyria. "Today we've gathered to make a plan how to stop him" He looked around. "Any ideas?"

Urid gave him a nod. "You said you know where they have attacked you. Perhaps you could lead us to the warehouse?", he suggested. Philip shook his head. "Too dangerous", he mumbled. "We know what these people did to Richard" He looked at Urid. "Think about what happens to your family if we fail" For a moment, Philip looked genuinely concerned. "No... attacking them directly is too dangerous. We have to be cunning if we want to have any chance of succeeding"

"What about the city guard?", Lyria asked. "Commander Nathamer seems to be a reasonable man. Perhaps his men can take care of this" This caused Philip to chuckle. "Please, Lyria, you want to trust the city guard with finding a killer? They have no experience with this"

Lyria made a scoffing sigh as she heard this. "And we are farmers, blacksmiths, tailors. We're smallfolk. When there's trouble, the city guard and the lord will protect us", she said. "Besides, as if you have any experience with finding a killer"

For a moment, Philip stared at her blankly, before slightly shaking his head. "You're wrong with that, Lyria", he muttered. "That's not the first time I'm dealing with people like him" This caused Richard and Urid to give him a shocked stare. Richard knew that Philip had lived in the North for most of his life, but besides that he rarely got his friend to talk about his past.

"What do you mean?", Urid asked, but Philip shook his head. "Not now, Urid", he answered.

"Just take my word that I know people who are similar to Wolfius" As he said that, he seemed to be almost melancholic, more sullen than Richard had ever seen him.

"Everything alright?", Rosalie asked with a caring voice, gently touching his shoulder. Philip gave her a short nod. "Of course", he said. "Just some bad memories" He closed his eyes and opened them again after a short moment, the sadness gone. "I hate people like him, who think they can do whatever they like just because they are stronger, or faster or more ruthless than others. We have to stop them. Not the city guard, but we. He's not threatening Nathamer and his men, he's threatening us, our families and loved ones. It's our duty to stop him"

"Harris", Jenna mumbled and Richard looked at her. "Lord Harris, I mean", she added. "He promised help" She looked up as everyone waited to hear more. Everyone except Alan at least. Richard's brother was looking at Ilish, who had turned her back towards him, standing a few tables to his left.

"That girl...", he mumbled. "She's a stunner" Richard sighed and grabbed him at the neck, slowly forcing him to look at the others. "Alan...", he growled. "Not now. Not her. Trust me, Ilish Granver is the only barmaid in the Reach you shouldn't flirt with"

Before Alan could answer, Lyria interrupted him. "What was that with Lord Harris?", she asked a bit surly. Jenna avoided to look at her as she was answering. "He promised help", she mumbled softly. "I'll help him and he will help us"

Lyria shook her head. "I admired Harris Flowers when he was still the bastard castellan. But I don't trust any lord to care enough for the smallfolk to take care of someone like Wolfius", she said. "No, I think Philip is right. We have a duty here. We are his targets, so we have to do something to stop him"

"What happened to the city guard?", Urid asked. "That was your idea after all" Lyria gave him a nod. "Don't get me wrong, Urid", she answered. "We still have to involve the city guard.

Commander Nathamer and his men have more experience in fighting than all of us combined.

But the difference between Nathamer and Lord Harris is that Nathamer is still smallfolk. He knows our problems. The lord on the other hand... No matter how good his intentions are, what does he know about hunger and sadness and fear? What does he know about winter? No, Lord Harris might try his best, but I won't take my chances with him"

Richard sighed. "Well, I agree that we can't rely solely on Harris", he answered and looked softly towards his daughter. "Jenna, I still want you to work with him. Can you do that?" She gave him a short nod. "I will", she answered shortly.

"Doesn't change the fact that we have to do something ourselves. I can't just sit in my house doing nothing while a murderer preys on our friends", Philip said. Richard gave him a nod. "We all want to do something, but we are too few to make a real difference. Like Lyria said, we're smallfolk, none of us is a trained warrior"

"And what if we had one?", Urid interjected, causing surprised looks from his friends. "A warrior, I mean. What if we would have a real warrior on our side, a trained soldier who knows how to fight and how to kill"

He looked to a table on his right and the others followed his stare. "Oh, bloody hells no!", Philip exclaimed. "Are you serious? Him?" A few tables across the room sat Jarow, the self-proclaimed Lord of the Bridges, his long dark brown hair hanging deep into his face, as he was staring into a jug of ale. He had saved Richards life and with his actions he had likely saved Jenna as well. It pained Richard to see his saviour like this. Jarow had been a great soldier once, one of Lord Raylan's best. Ten years ago, he had lost his mind after holding a bridge against the Ironborn, completely on his own against fifteen men. None of the Ironborn had survived that day...

"That man is a half-mad drunkard and you want to ask him for help?", Philip asked. Urid gave him a reluctant nod. "He might be a bit eccentric, but he's also one of the best fighters this city ever had. He killed fifteen men", he answered. Philip shrugged. "Might be true", he admitted. "But that was ten years ago. Look at him now, he's in no condition to fight. He's a heavy drinker and a madman. You want to risk having someone like him fighting with us? He could get us all killed!"

Urid shrugged. "Still worth a try in my eyes. He has more experience than all of us combined will ever have. I don't like that either, but he could be exactly who we need" Richard still looked at the old man, feeling pity inside of him. "He saved my life", he mumbled, causing Philip to look at him. "Oh, so you think it's a good idea working with someone like him? You wanna take the risk?"

[Ask Jarow for help]

Kersea forced herself to smile at Alysanne, before she answered. "Yes", she said. "Why not? We are friends" It wasn't even a real lie. Alysanne was the closest thing possible in a situation like this at least. Before Blackwater, things had been different, easier. Even Clayton had been different. Their group had almost thrice as many members back then, most of them weren't bad on a personal level. But now, only Kersea, Clayton and Alysanne remained. And Wolfius of course, if he was still alive at least.

A big grin appeared on Alysanne's face. "Really?", she said enthusiastically. "That is... oh, that is wonderful" For a moment, Kersea had the impression that she was about to clap her hands in joy, but this moment was gone in the blink of an eye. The usual cold look returned to Alysanne's eyes. "So... what exactly went wrong in your mission?", she asked. "I mean, you had to kill two defenceless women"

Kersea closed her eyes, recalling the older woman pleading for mercy. "Wolfius went wrong", she answered. "He went crazy, even more than usual. He preferred to make that girl suffer instead of killing her quickly" She saw a hint of interest in Alysanne's green eyes. "Did he?", she asked.

This put Kersea off her stride for a moment. "Did he what?", she asked surprised. Alysanne looked her straight in the eyes, her stare appeared to be longing. "Made her suffer", she answered. "Did he?" The casual tone in her voice would have shocked Kersea if she would talk to anyone else, but with Alysanne she should have expected it. "I... think he did", she answered carefully. A smirk flashed across her new friend's face. "I wish I could have been there"

Kersea couldn't suppress a sad smile. "Yeah, would've been for the better", she mumbled. The curious look returned to Alysanne's eyes. "And your target?", she asked. Kersea let out a sigh. "She died painfully", she answered, noticing the pleased look in Alysanne's eyes. "Anyway, when it came to Wolfius target, the... the guards arrived. He took too long to kill her, I think. I really don't know"

"And you?", Alysanne asked, narrowing her eyes in suspicion. "What have you done while the guards came?" Kersea gulped as she saw the cold look in Alysanne's eyes. They were friends now, right? That had to be good for something. "I... freaked out. Wolfius... he... he tortured that girl. Made her screams sound through the whole castle"

Alysanne shook her head. "What a fucking idiot", she mumbled to Kersea's surprise. She had expected a stern lecture or something like that, but instead it almost looked like Alysanne understood her. "Should have damaged her throat first. Not enough to make her suffocate, but enough to silence her", the other woman continued and Kersea let out a sigh. What had she expected?

"Anyway, I can't really blame you", Alysanne continued. "I mean, you saved yourself. No way you could have taken the whole guard. It's Wolfius' fault for behaving like an amateur. I don't blame you for abandoning him. And neither will Clayton"

Kersea let out a joyless chuckle. "He'll find something to blame me for", she said with resignation in her voice. Alysanne shook her head. "He won't. You know how much you mean to him" For a moment, Kersea avoided to look her in the eyes. "I do", she answered. "That's the worst part of this whole mess"

Before Alysanne could answer, the sound of the door opening caught their attention. Years of training caused Kersea to put her hand to the place where her dagger should have been located. But she had left her own weapon in her room, in favour of Wolfius' dagger, the one with the Hoare symbol on it. And that dagger...

"Kersea!", an all too familiar voice exclaimed and Clayton walked into her field of view. He had a stern face as he approached her, his milky white left eye contrasting strongly with his dark right eye. "We... I have been worried for you" Even though she didn't want it, he gave her a hug.

"Don't do that again", he whispered in her ear as she tried to squirm free. He finally noticed her facial expression, immediately letting go of her, albeit his hands were still resting on her shoulders. "Tell me what happened", he urged her. "Everything"

Despite everything that happened, she couldn't refrain from shooting him a cold glare. "Well, it all started when I slaughtered the bastard who killed my parents. Then I met an even bigger bastard...", she hissed and for a moment, Clayton looked genuinely hurt. "You know exactly how you can hurt me, don't you?", he growled. "After all I did for you"

She snorted as she heard that and slightly rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right", she mumbled. "I don't have to remind you of all the things you did for me, right?" Clayton shook his head. "I saved your life when Butterfly called for your head after you killed his man. I gave you a chance", he answered. She looked him straight in the eye, searching for a hint of mockery. What she saw made her shiver. "You really believe that, don't you? You think you did me a favour. You really expect me to be thankful" She shook her head. "Fuck! You!", she growled. "And fuck your Butterfly!"

"You're adorable when you're angry, puppy", Alysanne chuckled and raised a brow as Kersea looked at her. "What? It's true. Adorable!" Clayton gave her a cold glare and Alysanne raised her hands. "Alright", she mumbled. "I'm silent" She took a few steps back, looking genuinely upset. Clayton let out a sigh and closed his eye. "I don't have time for your insults right now", he said. "The whole city is in a turmoil" He opened his eyes again, focusing his stare on her. "Tell me what happened. I want to hear the full truth"

Kersea gulped as she heard the sound in his voice. She knew, he mustn't learn the truth about Harking. About how she fucked it up. "It's Wolfius fault", she said, telling at least half of the truth.

"He took too long. Alarmed the guards. I barely escaped with my life" And that was the delicate part. Clayton was good at finding lies. But Kersea was a good liar...

From the moment Clayton's facial expression darkened, she knew she did a mistake. "The guards...", he said sullenly. "Wolfius fault..." She saw something in his eyes she always feared. That one look that always marked more pain for her. "It wasn't, say, the arrival of a guy you were ordered to kill?" She gave him a shocked look, as someone else entered the room. Wolfius. There was a cut over his right eye and it appeared to be paler than usual, blinded. If anything, it made the stare out of his remaining good eye even more unsettling, since he seemed to concentrate his hatred into it, almost causing her to flinch. His bedraggled blonde hair was hanging over his face, partially covering the new wound above his eye, where a new scar would form.

"Oh, you lying little whore", he growled. It sounded almost like an animal, a furious animal. "You thought you could get away with that, right? Luckily, I met Clayton on my way back. I told him everything" A cruel smile flashed over his face, showing his teeth. "You are screwed, whore" Alysanne took a step towards him, but stopped when he growled at her. "Wolfius!", she mumbled. "Your... your eye..." He seemed to force himself to smile at her. "It does not matter", he said. "This body has its limits either way. And losing one eye... well, it won't stop me, it won't even slow me down. But Harking... for that, I'm going to take both of his eyes and feed them to his daughter"

Kersea had no doubt that he was deadly serious with this. She gave Clayton a helpless look, but he shook his head. "Don't look at me like that, Kersea", he said. "I've hoped you would tell me the truth. I've hoped you would be honest with me"

"Would it make any difference?", Kersea asked, feeling the tension rising inside of her. Clayton shook his head. "Not really", he admitted. And before she could even react, his closed fist hit her in the stomach, hard enough to make her cry out in pain and to send her to the ground. "You know what Butterfly ordered me to do", he said, crouching down to her. "And you know how much it pains me to hurt you" She coughed, suppressing the strong urge to throw up on the floor. The punch was strong enough to make her vision blur, but she saw Alysanne's face behind Clayton in a strange mix of apathy and worry. And she saw Wolfius, grinning triumphantly. "Kill her, Clayton", he growled. "Beat her to death"

Clayton shook his head. "Only until she learned her lesson", he said, looking back at Kersea, his gaze hardened. "Only until she can show me that she's a good little follower, a good little killer, someone who knows how to behave" His open palm hit her in the face, causing her head to hit the hard ground below her. The impact of the hit was enough to make her struggle for consciousness.

"You know what you were ordered to do", he growled as she was still struggling to stay awake, ignoring her numbing senses and the thumping pain on the right side of her head, where her cheek was burning in pain and warm blood was flowing down her temple. He grabbed her at the collar of her shirt, violently slapping her in the face, hitting her already wounded cheek in the process. "I ordered you to kill Harking", he growled. "A clear order! It would have been simple, you were born to do this!" This time he hit her other cheek, causing her to moan in pain as tears flew down her face, burning in her fresh wounds, as a violent cough forced its way up her throat. She noticed that a few drops of blood flew out of her mouth as she coughed.. "If only you could have listened!", Clayton screamed in her face. "You know what he ordered me to do in case you misbehave!"

In some part of her brain that wasn't busy with hurting like hell, Kersea realized that Clayton was crying too. She knew, he believed that he didn't want to do it, didn't want to beat her. But she also knew that he would never refuse a direct order from Butterfly. He was a good and pathetic little follower. He slapped her again, as if he had read her thoughts, this time hitting her chin and nearly dislocating her jaw. "Next time you ignore a direct order", Clayton growled. "Sweet little Briar will pay the price for you. I'm done protecting her from Butterfly when all you ever give me in return is hate"

The mention of her sister caused Kersea to snap back to her senses, despite the numbing pain. She realized she had clenched her fist, hard enough to make her palm hurt. Clayton hadn't noticed it, he was still busy blaming her for what he did out of his own free will, blaming her for something he clearly enjoyed. He wouldn't see it coming. In this moment, a part of Kersea wanted nothing more than to break his nose and to shatter his jaw, to punch back twice as hard. But another part of her, the part that was scared of him, was afraid of what he might do to her if she would hurt him... She realized he had closed his fist again, hauling off to hit her again...

[Punch back]

Garthon

"You want to hear the truth?", Garthon asked. The Harper gave him a short nod. "But what if you don't believe the truth?" "Let me worry about that", Jon answered. "Or... perhaps you *should* be worried about it, a tiny bit at least" He gave Jared a short nod, who raised from his chair, walking towards the tavern's door. "Tell your story, Garthon. Convince me"

Garthon took another look at George, who shook his head again, this time not very subtle.

Dacey noticed it and narrowed her eyes and of course Jon noticed it too. "Your friend does not want you to tell the truth", Dacey remarked and George's face got bright red. "What?", he stuttered. "I..." He sighed. "You won't believe us!"

“George”, Garthon said softly. “I believe Ser Harper here is a smart man” He gave Jon a charming smile. “You are a smart man, right?” Jon did not answer immediately, instead he slightly raised his right hand, the one that had been under the table, revealing the hilt of a knife. Garthon quickly raised both of his hands. “Okay, okay. I'll start at the beginning” He pointed at himself. “First of all, I was born on Pyke and I am the younger brother of one of Harren Hoare's captains”

He noticed the alarmed stare on Dacey's face and heard a muffled curse coming from Jared. Jon's face on the other hand stayed motionless. “Fucking knew it”, Jared mumbled. “That fight with Redloon was a ruse”

Garthon gave him a nod. “Partially”, he admitted. “But more of that later. To my defence, I have to say that I am a bit atypical for an Ironborn. I'm not that much into killing and I've never raped a girl” Dacey showed her teeth as she heard this, albeit it did not remind Garthon of a smile.

“Surely you want some sort of medal now?”, she snarled.

Garthon politely ignored her remark and waited a moment before continuing. “This man next to me is George and he works for Lord Tully. Together with the lord and a few others, we are currently trying to find a way to dispose of Harren Hoare”

This caused Dacey to chuckle, while Jon allowed himself a smirk. “You want to kill Harren Hoare?”, he asked, clearly unconvinced. “An Ironborn wants to kill the greatest King of the Isles and Rivers that ever lived?”

Garthon gave him a short nod and reciprocated the Harper's smirk. “To be fair, he's only the third King of the Isles and Rivers that ever lived. Competition isn't that high when the other contestants are Halleck and Harwyn Hoare”, he said. “But I have to admit, while I was never the most enthusiastic supporter of Black Harren, I would have never even thought about rebelling against him. Unlike you, I presume”

Jon's smirk vanished. “No assumptions, Ironborn”, he growled. “Just your story” “Of course”, Garthon quickly answered. “As I said, I would have never rebelled against Harren Hoare, if it weren't for my brother insisting on working with Lord Tully to bring our beloved tyrant down”

“Your brother, the Iron Fleet captain?”, Dacey asked with suspicion in her voice. George gave her a nod. “Torvin”, he answered. “You'd like him. He's stern, ferocious, he has iron in his blood. He's the fighter, I'm the talker”

He looked at George, who seemed to be resigned and avoided to look at him. “I was, well, kinda dragged into all of this. My brother has his reasons to pick up the fight against Harren the Black. He met Edmyn Tully and together they made a suicidal plan to kill the king. I support Torvin because he is my brother, not out of any particularly rebellious feeling”

“How kind of you”, Dacey said with a mocking voice. “And why you are here, on the road to Maidenpool?” Garthon gave her a short nod. “I was getting there, my dear”, he said. “My

brother, Tully and a third conspirator, Gabin Strad, stayed back at Harrenhal to win the trust of Harlan Hoare..." Jon interrupted him by spitting on the ground. "Harlan is a monster", he said. "A cruel and violent psychopath. You're telling me that is a good idea?"

Garthon shook his head. "I'm the one telling a story as unlikely as that to three outlaws. Surely I'm not in a position to judge my brothers behaviour", he said slowly. "However, I agree that anything involving any son of Harren Hoare or the man himself is a horrible idea"

"You didn't answer my question", Dacey remarked. "Why are you here, Garthon?" Garthon looked back at George who sighed. "We're on our way to Maidenpool", the boy explained. "Lord Tully has arranged a meeting with a smuggler from Lys who is going to supply us with a dangerous poison and a special crossbow forged in Qohor. Torvin's friendship with Harlan will bring us in a position where we can get close enough to Harren to kill him"

"So, that is your plan?", Dacey asked. "Befriending the kings monster of a son to get close to him and shooting him with poisonous arrows?" She looked at Jon. "That's the most terrible story I've ever heard"

Jon shook his head. "You expect me to believe you?", he asked. Garthon exchanged a short look with George, before answering. "The question is not if you believe me", he mumbled and Jon gave him a curious look. "That's exactly the question", he stated.

Garthon shook his head. "No", he answered. "The question is, can you afford not to believe me? If you kill us now, you kill one Ironborn and one loyal Riverlander. If you let us live and our story turns out to be true, we kill Harren Hoare for you and end all your problems"

"If you succeed", Jon remarked and Garthon raised an eyebrow. "So, you do believe us!", he exclaimed and Jon sighed. "I do", he answered. "To be honest, I've heard less believable stories that turned out to be true. Tully is a good man and it was only a matter of time until he would join the ranks of those who are done with kneeling to a tyrant. After what happened to Frey's daughter..."

He gave Garthon a deadly serious look. "Tell me, in your plan, what will happen to Harren's sons?", he asked. Garthon shrugged as an answer. "I'm not that deeply involved in the plans. I assume Harlan is going to die alongside his father. Leaving Harmund, Harndon and Harrick" Jon nodded as he heard this. "Harmund is the dangerous one", he stated. "He's the one you have to look out for. While Harrick is similarly intelligent, he's not as malicious as his brothers, from what I've heard. Harndon on the other hand..." He didn't need to continue. Garthon knew the stories about Harndon Hoare, the kings thirdborn son. The only one who was officially proclaimed as unfit to rule, the only one who was officially proclaimed as insane and disinherited. A Hoare nonetheless. While Harmund was certainly the most dangerous of Harren's sons, Harndon was the most brutal, barely more than an animal, craving for violence and with a disturbing fondness of human flesh.

"His sons will be dealt with", George reassured him. "Harlan is going to die alongside him, together with every other son who might be present when we assassinate the king. With a bit of luck we get Harmund with him. Harndon is of no concern for Lord Tully. He's unstable, unfit to rule. The captains and riverlords will never accept him"

"And Harrick?", Jon asked. "The youngest son. Poetically, the best of this rotten pack" George bit his lip as he seemed to think about an answer. "Harrick isn't a bad man", he answered. "For an Ironborn of course"

Dacey frowned as she heard this. "All of them are bad. They are wretched murderers", she hissed. Jon shook his head before Garthor could answer. "It's not that easy, Dacey. After all, Edric gives each of them a fair trial", he remarked. "It just happened that none of them were found innocent so far" He looked at Garthor and smirked. "Doesn't mean there are no innocent Ironborn"

Garthor gave George a nod and noticed that the boy seemed to be less tense than before. "So, we're free to go?", he asked and attempted to stand up. Immediately, Dacey jumped up, pulling out a small knife and pointing it at him. Judging from the sound behind him, Jared was ready to attack them too. Well, that did not work as easy as planned.

"Easy, Dacey", Jon remarked. The Harper was still sitting on his chair, carefully watching Garthor's movements. "He convinced me" Garthor let out a sigh of relief, but still waited before he continued to stand up. Dacey still had her knife pointed at him, but she made no attempt of attacking him.

"One more thing, Garthor", Jon remarked and Garthor stopped moving. "If what you say is true, you sound like you could need some allies" He finally raised from his chair, exchanging a quick look with Dacey.

"Wait, wait, wait...", George exclaimed. "You offer to help us? You were just about to kill us!" He looked at Garthor. "Do you.. do you think it's a good idea to work with them?" Garthor looked at the Harper. "Do I have a choice?", he asked. Jon gave him a nod. "There's always a choice", he answered. "If you decline my offer, you can leave on your own. We won't stop you. If you accept my offer, we will travel to Maidenpool together. It's your decision"

"But you wanted to kill us!", George stated and Jon shook his head. "I wanted to hear your story, George Rivers", he explained. "If I wanted you dead, I could have killed you easily. Even now, you're at my mercy. But I'm not a murderer. You two seem to be good and honest men, so I won't kill you"

Garthor looked at George, who seemed to be uncertain. "You trust them?", he asked. George glanced at Dacey, before reluctantly shaking his head. "Not really, no...", he admitted, causing a glare from Dacey. "It's your call of course... I mean, if you want to trust them, then I'll accept that. We could indeed use their help, if they are honest with us" Jon chuckled joyfully as he heard

this. "How the roles have changed", he mumbled. "Now it's up to you to decide if you trust us, Garthon Breaker"

[Work with Jon]

Ellena

"So, how do you know Jaron?", Ellena asked as they walked down the nightly streets of Oldtown. Of course she had accepted Martin's help. It would have been too dangerous to go alone, especially in this city. And Martin proved himself to be better than she thought he would be. He seemed to enjoy the opportunity to speak in his native Braavosi, just as she enjoyed hearing the familiar language. Still, she was worried sick about Terroma and what the Burned Man might do to him should he learn about his location. She knew, Jaron trusted him, but Jaron was naive in a certain way. From their talks she got the opinion that he wanted to see the world like a story, separated in black and in white. And compared to Butterfly, the Burned Man certainly looked like the white side in this conflict. But Ellena knew what men like him were capable of. If anything, he was a lighter shade of black.

"Only met him yesterday", Martin admitted. "I was accompanying Harpy to the docks, where she wanted to visit him aboard your ship. Disliked him at first, but you can't resent that guy for long, can you?" Ellena slightly chuckled. "No, you can't", she admitted. "And he trusts you?"

Martin narrowed his eyes. "Strange question, young lady", he answered. "Yes, I think he trusts me. But you obviously don't" Ellena shook her head and Martin sighed. "May I ask why?"

Ellena turned her head away from him, towards the street in front of them. "Your Burned Man is a criminal", she answered. "And one of the worst kinds on top of that. I know men like him. He exploits children for his crimes. Abbas told me"

"Normally I wouldn't give two shits about what Abbas says", Martin answered. "But this time he spoke the truth for once, at least partially. The majority of the Burned Man's workers are children, but he is not exploiting them, not at all. They earn good money, more than they would earn by working at the docks or at the farms. They get to eat and he makes sure that they don't have to sleep on the streets"

"So you're telling me he's some sort of saint for the orphans of Oldtown?", Ellena asked in suspicion. Martin shook his head. "That would take it too far and he would protest vehemently against such a thing. The things he uses the children for are despicable from a certain point of view. Thievery, espionage, smuggling... murder if necessary"

He stopped and looked at Ellena. "You are an orphan too, am I right, young lady?", he asked. Ellena closed her eyes before answering. "I am", she mumbled. "Sorry to hear that", Martin answered. "But I assume you haven't been an orphan for long. Your parents have been rich, am I right?"

She gave him a nod. "My mother died shortly after my birth. My father was a rich merchant. He was murdered a few months ago", she answered sullenly and felt a lump in her throat. Martin looked at her genuinely sorry. "I apologize for bringing that up", he said. "But it proves my point. You have been rich, you grew up in a nice house with a loving father. Not all of us had that much luck. Not all of us had a choice"

He sighed. "I would have died a long time ago if it weren't for men like him. Trust me, the Burned Man is a good man compared to the bastard who took me in after my father was slain. Unlike many others in his position, he cares for the children who work for him. And unlike many others, he never had a choice either"

"What do you mean by that", Ellena asked intrigued, albeit she noticed that her voice sounded more mocking than she intended it to sound. "Think about it, young lady", Martin answered.

"When he and Harpy arrived in Oldtown, they were a cripple and his adopted daughter, a man with a destroyed body and a young girl, far younger than you are now. They had no choice, not in this city"

He paused for a moment and Ellena noticed that his voice sounded more agitated than usual as he continued. "Butterfly on the other hand...", he growled. "He has nothing good inside of him. The Burned Man has lines he would never cross. Butterfly on the other hand has no limits" He looked at Ellena. "If you look for a good side in this conflict, like in the stories your daddy told you when you had trouble sleeping, you're in the wrong city. Oldtown can exist with the Burned Man. With Butterfly however, this city will die"

Ellena pressed her lips together, avoiding to answer. She did not like this, not one bit. Working with someone like the Burned Man... nothing Martin could say would ever convince her that this was a good idea. Still, she had to admit that there was a lack of alternatives in this city. Children starving to death on the streets was undoubtedly worse.

"We're here", Martin murmured, causing Ellena to shift her attention back to the street.

"Ragpickers Wynd" The alleyway to her left barely deserved to be called like that. It was small and narrow, too narrow for Ellena and Martin to walk side by side. The houses framing it were high and crooked, it's roofs nearly touching each other, leaving the street in a gloomy twilight even at the brightest hours of the day. Right now, in the middle of the night, it was frighteningly dark.

"You want me to go first?", Martin asked. Ellena shook her head, even though she had never been fond of dark alleys at night. "Just make sure that nothing happens to me", she said with a sheepish voice. "I got your back, young lady", Martin chuckled. "Just go ahead and don't forget to tell me as soon as the darkness scares you"

Ellena gave him an angry glare. "I am not scared by the darkness!", she insisted, storming into the alleyway, Martin close behind her. "We're looking for a butcher's shop in here. You know

one?" Martin did not answer, instead she saw that he had his right hand clenched around the hilt of his sword. "You're afraid of the dark?", she asked with a smirk. Martin gave her a glare as she said this and shook his head. "I just like being prepared", he answered. Ellena smiled at him. "Sure", she chuckled, watching him narrowing his eyes. "I'm not!", he insisted and let out a frustrated sigh. "Listen, no one likes little girls who are too smart for their own good" Ellena grinned and started to walk deeper into the alleyway. "Butcher's shop", she mumbled. "What does a butcher's shop look like?" Before Martin could answer, a sudden movement near one of the houses caught their attention, causing Martin to draw his sword, while Ellena almost took a jump back.

"You're pretty loud for someone who tries to sneak through a backalley at night", a male voice whispered. A figure stepped out of a doorway to her right. The man was a bit taller than Martin and wore dark clothes. Ellena only saw him as he started moving and wasn't able to see any features of his appearance until he got closer towards her. Even now, she was only able to see that he was a bearded man and apparently wore a hood. And he was definitely not Terroma. "What do you want?", Martin growled, shoving himself past Ellena. He pointed his sword at the stranger, who in turn raised his hands. "Easy now", the man said. "I don't want to fight. However, it appears you want something from me. You're looking for a butcher's shop, if I heard you correctly"

Ellena narrowed her eyes. "You're the butcher?", she asked. "Terroma's friend?" Immediately after she said this, she regretted mentioning his name. The stranger gave her a short nod. "Not the butcher, but a friend", he answered. "I work with him while he has business here in the city. My name is Samuel Puffer"

"I know someone named Samuel", Ellena answered and tried to sound as hostile as possible. It apparently had no effect on the stranger, who let out a deep laughter. "You obviously don't like him, am I right?"

The memory of Samuel Harrington attacking the captain aboard the Princess flashed through her head. She was almost able to feel the blade barely missing her back as she ran away from him. With a frown, she shook her head. "I hate him", she answered and Samuel gave her a nod. "You do", he stated. "But I'm obviously not him, right?"

"You aren't", Ellena mumbled. "And now let us pass. We have to talk to Terroma" Samuel shook his head. "He's not here", he explained. "Has business to do in the city. Won't be back for another day. Why do you want to talk to him?"

"I... I'm his friend. Ellena Terys", Ellena stuttered, unsure how to deal with this man. Samuel shook his head. "He never mentioned you. What do you want from him?" Before she was able to stop herself, she had pulled out the envelope containing the letter from the Burned Man out of her pocket. Samuel narrowed his eyes. "A letter?", he asked.

Martin turned around and sighed. "Ellena...", he groaned. "That was stupid" Ellena gave him a reluctant nod, but she saw the look in Samuel's eyes and knew it was too late to turn back now. "A letter?", the man asked. "You came here in the middle of the night just to give him a letter?" "Do you want to stop me?", Ellena asked. Samuel shook his head. "Not at all. But you can't give him the letter either. Like I said, Terroma is not here" He gave Martin a suspicious look. "However, you can give me that letter. He'll be back tomorrow or the day after. I'll tell him you have been there and left something for him. If you tell me the truth about being his friend, I'm sure he'll be overjoyed to hear this"

Martin shook his head. "Giving you the letter? Seven Hells no!", he exclaimed, turning around towards Ellena. "Let's go, young lady. Your friend is not here. We'll come back another time" He tried to get past Ellena, who stood still in the middle of the backalley. This man claimed to be a friend of Terroma... could she trust him? If he said the truth, he could give Terroma the letter as soon as he got back from his work. The Burned Man made it clear that this letter was important. But if Samuel was lying to her, she would hand the letter to a complete stranger, perhaps even someone working for Butterfly...

[Don't give him the letter]

Lucas

Lucas awoke to the sound of someone knocking at his door. No, not his door. The sounds were too muffled for that. Weak rays of light fell through the window, illuminating Lunett's room. She was still sleeping, curled up next to him, her left arm laid over his chest. A smile flashed across Lucas' face as he barely dared to breath, fearing to wake her up.

"Flowers!", a muffled voice shouted and the knocking continued. "We're late, get up!" Again, the sounds of someone loudly knocking at a door were heard. "Flowers! Are you even there?", the voice shouted again. Yes, that was clearly Leonard and he sounded frustrated.

Lunett sighed and slightly moved, strands of her brown hair falling over her face. The sound of footsteps came closer and suddenly, Lucas heard someone loudly knocking at his door.

"Lunett!", Leonard called her. "Are you awake? Do you know where Lucas is?"

This was finally enough to wake Lunett, who raised her head, looking directly at Lucas. A happy smile appeared on her face. "Good morning", she mumbled, leaning forward to kiss him. "You slept well?", she asked and Lucas grin got wieder

"Is someone in there with...", the voice of Leonard asked before Lucas could answer. "Oh, come on!", the other knight exclaimed. "Flowers, you sly bastard!" Lunett giggled as she heard this

and Lucas couldn't suppress a short laughter. "Good morning, Lenny!", he shouted through the door and he could almost hear Leonard frowning.

"Fuck you too, Flowers", he answered, albeit he sounded joyful as he said it. "The sun is up and so should you. We have a busy day ahead and I plan to be out of this city by evening, so hurry up a little bit!" Lunett slightly raised from Lucas' chest, looking at the door. "Good morning, Leonard", she answered softly. "Give us a moment, will ya?"

Leonard mumbled something unintelligible, before his voice got louder again. "Sure thing", he said. "But don't take too long. I bet Mullendore does not like waiting" The sound of his footsteps got more distant as he left. Lunett sank down onto Lucas' chest again, her brown hair now touching his chin. "Just one moment", she mumbled, snuggling up against him.

"Last night was...", Lucas started to say, but she put a finger on his mouth. "Shhh", she mumbled. "Don't talk now" For a short moment, she just laid in his arms and Lucas felt happier than he felt in years. As she tried to rise, he gave her a passionate kiss and she sank back into his arms again. "We should...", she mumbled, but Lucas interrupted her by kissing her again.

"We really should get up"

Lucas cradled her in his arms, gently stroking her hair. "Or we could stay here for a while longer. No Leonard. No Mullendore. No Oldtown. Just you and me", he whispered and her happy smile made him beam with joy. "I'd love to", she whispered back, before gently squirming free from his hug. "But we can't. Not yet"

She finally raised from the bed, noticing that Lucas was staring at her naked body. A smirk stretched across her face as she reached for her dress. "Not now, Lucas", she chuckled. He let out a frustrated moan and noticed that her smile disappeared. "I... I can't stop wondering... what will my father say?", she asked.

Lucas had thought about that too. Of course, he had barely talked to Lunett's father, but what he saw of him left him with a bad opinion. "He will probably try to murder me", he mumbled and raised from the bed, putting his arms around Lunett. "Don't joke about that", she whispered and Lucas noticed that she was slightly shivering. "He might try it indeed. He can be unreasonable when it comes to me"

"Would he object if I offer to...", Lucas started to say, but choked on the words for a moment. He barely knew her! He met her a week ago, he barely knew her father. But last night he had taken her virginity, in the worst case he even got her pregnant. He barely knew her, yes, but he liked her a lot. And he was a knight, he had to take this seriously. He wouldn't father a bastard!

"What?", Lunett asked and Lucas realized that she already knew what he wanted to say. "Would he object to what?" "Would he object if I'd offer to marry you?", Lucas revealed, watching her eyes widen and her cheeks blushing in a beautiful rosy colour. "You... what?", Lunett stuttered, a smile appearing on her face. "You mean...?" Lucas gave her a nod. "I know this is pretty fast,

but...", he said, but was interrupted as she gave him a passionate kiss. "He wouldn't object", she said with a smile. "Neither would I"

Lucas held her in his arms for a moment and wished for nothing more than to forget this city, to forget everything aside from her. For the first time since his father had banished him from his families lands, he knew exactly what he wanted.

They were interrupted by the sound of someone knocking at the door again. "Seven Hells, Flowers! Hurry up!", Leonard called and Lucas rolled with his eyes, while Lunett pulled away from him. "Horrible timing, Leonard", Lucas shouted and let out a sigh. "You're welcome, Flowers. And now come on!", the other knight answered.

Lucas needed only a few moments to put his clothes back on, while Lunett needed slightly longer to brush her hair. As they finally opened the door, they were greeted with the sight of a visibly annoyed Leonard. "Fucking finally", he said, albeit Lucas saw a pleased look in his eyes. "Now come on, we got a lot to do"

Leonard started to walk down the hallway, while Lucas and Lunett exchanged a short look. The girl was still smiling, albeit her face now had a bright red colour. "We need to talk about that later", she said.

Lucas put an arm around her as they walked down the hallway. "We will, he promised her. "After we got out of here. Then we return to your father and I will tell him everything" He gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I will tell him that I intend to marry his beautiful daughter" This caused her to snicker and Lucas was sure that Leonard slightly sighed as he heard this.

Dairon was already waiting for them in the taproom, sitting on a table all for himself. He looked well-rested, calmer and more collected than the day before. In contrast, Lucas noticed that Leonard looked slightly nervous and moved a bit more stiffly than usual.

"Alright, now that the rest of us finally decided to show up, we can plan our day", Leonard said. "Lucas, we will go to the Hightower in a minute. Maron Mullendore is waiting for us and I want to get that done as soon as possible" Lucas gave him an understanding nod. He wasn't too eager to meet this man again, but both of them knew that Mullendore probably was their best bet when it came to help in this city.

"Dairon and Lunett, you will stay here while we're gone. Don't leave the building unless you are in danger", Leonard continued. Dairon gave him a startled glare. "Do you think is could be dangerous for us?", he asked. Lunett gave him a grin. "Do not worry", she said. "As long as I'm here, you'll be safe"

Leonard ignored her remark as he continued. "I don't know if you're in danger", he admitted. "It's possible. Getting Mullendore to help us in leaving this city is one of our most important tasks

today. As long as we get his help, you'll be safe" He looked at Lucas and didn't need to continue. As long as they got Mullendore's help...

"If something goes wrong, I want you to flee", Lucas advised them. "Run to the Citadel. Archmaester Quent might be willing to help you" This statement caused Leonard to glare at him. "Quent?", he growled. "That snake won't help them without any ulterior motive"

Lucas gave him a nod. "True", he admitted. "But if we fail to win Mullendore's help, Quent might be the only one who could keep them safe" Leonard did not answer, but his facial expression made it clear that he disliked this idea. "Whatever", he mumbled after a few moments. "Shall we get going?"

Lucas looked at Lunett, who gave him a sweet smile. "Don't ask me", she said. "I have no problem with you staying here forever" Lucas let out a sigh and gave her a short kiss. "As much as I'd like to", he answered. "I'll be back soon"

He and Leonard raised from their chairs and Lucas gave Dairon a stern look. "We do all of this because of you", he told him. "So I want you to listen to Lunett while we're gone. If something happens, you bring her to the Citadel, do you understand me?"

Leonard put a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Flowers", he said softly. "The earlier we deal with Mullendore, the earlier we're back here" He gave Lunett and Dairon a short nod. "Follow my advice. If you're in danger, don't pretend to be heroes. Stay safe"

With these words, he turned around and walked out of the building. Lucas gave Lunett a last look and walked after him. He couldn't deny it, he was worried for her safety. Never before had he been worried for someone like that. And he wouldn't stop being worried until they would finally leave this city behind.

He noticed Leonard's big grin only after a while. "Something the matter, Len?", he asked.

Leonard slightly patted him on the back. "Oh Flowers, you lucky bastard", he grinned. "Are you sure that you picked a good time to roll in the hay with the innkeeper's daughter?"

This caused Lucas to frown and he gave Leonard a surprised look. "Wait... are you upset? You encouraged me to talk to her!", he protested. Leonard's grin turned into a smirk. "You got an interesting definition of 'talking' to someone, Flowers. I'm not upset about you, I am proud"

His smirk vanished and for a moment he looked deadly serious at Lucas, as they were walking down the streets of Oldtown. "What are you going to do with her?", he asked. Lucas pressed his lips together. "I offered to marry her", he answered, causing Leonard to laugh out loud.

"Marrying?", he asked in surprise. "Congratulations, I guess" "Yeah...", Lucas answered slowly. "I guess. It's not that I have that much of a choice here. I took her virginity and in the worst case I got her pregnant. What kind of knight would I be if I would just leave her now?"

Leonard gave him a nod. "You're a good knight, Lucas", he answered. "And I respect your decision. Aside from that, she's a decent looking girl. You could do worse" A pained expression flashed over his face and he stopped for a moment, holding his back.

"What's up?", Lucas asked as Leonard put both of his hands on his back, slowly kneading it.

"Well, not everyone of us had a good night", he answered. "Of course I gave Dairon the bed and took the floor for myself. Wasn't exactly comfortable. On top of that, you won't believe me how loud that boy snorts" He continued to walk down the street, slightly shaking his head.

Lucas grinned as he heard this. "No way", he exclaimed. "We're talking about the same Dairon who barely speaks a word when he's with us, right?" Leonard gave him a nod. "Like a goddamn dragon", he explained. Both of them chuckled and for a moment, Lucas nearly forgot his worries. But as soon as he looked to the sky, seeing the huge tower in front of him, his fear came back and his smile vanished.

The Hightower was visible from every part of this city, but it looked more intimidating the closer it came. It was a wise move that the city guards headquarters were located inside of this tower. Lucas wasn't a criminal, but he could imagine the effect it had on anyone who was brought there for interrogation.

"Remember what we talked about, Flowers", Leonard reminded him as they approached the hulking building. "He mustn't know about Dairon" Lucas gave him a hasty nod. "I understand", he mumbled. "But what if there's no other choice?"

Leonard gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?", he asked. "What if the only way to convince him to help us is by giving him what he wants?", Lucas answered. "He's a man of the law. Surely he won't do anything to harm Dairon, right?"

This caused Leonard to shake his head again. "Don't be such a fool, Flowers. Not all of us are as honourable as you. If we give him Dairon, what use do we have for him? Remember that this man is not our friend, he is still sworn to Hightower! I can only assure you, don't do anything stupid"

They arrived at the Hightower a few minutes later. It was the tallest building in the known world and right now, Lucas had the expression that it was the best guarded as well. Still, getting into the tower wasn't hard work. The large wooden doors, bigger than Raylansfair's main gate, were always opened, allowing the knights to enter, albeit under the watchful eyes of dozens of guards. Lucas had no doubt that one of them would inform Mullendore of their presence. Neither Lucas or Leonard had brought their weapons or armour and Lucas was glad about it. They couldn't do anything against the amount of force Lord Hightower displayed here. While the tower itself was impressive mainly because of its height, the circular entrance hall was stunning in a completely different way. It was larger than the courtyard back in Raylansfair,

the bottom consisting completely out of blackened marble. Seven golden pillars supported the ceiling far above them. At least two hundred soldiers, clad in grey armour, stood at guard, blocking several stairways and doors that lead to different parts of the tower. Countless courtiers walked around, walking from room to room, the combined sounds of their footsteps enough to drown every conversation.

It wasn't long until Lucas noticed a man walking straight towards them. From the grey armour he was wearing, Lucas identified him as part of the city guard. He was older than him, probably in his late thirties, with short, black hair and a stubble beard. He approached them with swift steps, taking a short, but polite bow in front of them. "Leonard Constantine and Lucas Flowers?", he asked. Leonard gave him a nod. "We are", he answered. "We're here to talk to Ser Maron Mullendore"

The man gave them a handwave, ordering them to follow them, before turning around and walking towards one of the doors that lead out of hall. "My name is Ryder Harrington, captain of the guard. Ser Maron is already informed of your arrival. He will meet you in his office"

With these words, he continued his way through the tower, leading them to a large wooden door. Behind it, Lucas and Leonard entered a second, far smaller hall, filled with guardsmen, who were apparently off duty at the moment, sitting around several tables, eating or playing cards. Several of them gave their guide respectful nods, some even greeted Lucas and Leonard with short nods.

Ryder lead them directly towards a short, open door, revealing a small, tidy chamber behind it. Maron Mullendore sat on a large chair, his arms resting on the dark, wooden table. In front of him, huge stacks of paperwork. He looked paler than he did yesterday, his red hair looking especially messy now. He gave them a short nod as they entered. "Ser Lucas, Ser Leonard. It's an honour to meet you again", he said with his raspy voice, pointing at two chairs in front of his desk. "Please, have a seat"

He gave the guardsman a small nod. "Ryder, thank you for bringing them here. Could you get the letter?" He looked back at Lucas. "That's why you are here, right?" Lucas gave him a nod. "Indeed, Ser Maron. Thank you for meeting us"

Mullendore's mouth formed a tired grin as Ryder left the room, closing the door behind him. "I've made some room. Are you okay?", he asked. "Is there any reason not to be okay?", Leonard asked and Lucas noticed the hostile tone in his voice. Mullendore gave him a nod. "Indeed it is", he answered shortly. "Butterfly is interested in you. That's usually a death sentence"

"You've informed us about that", Lucas told him. "But so far he hasn't made a move on us"

Mullendore's tired grin got a bit wider, but he still showed no joy. "None you know about", he growled. "Do not underestimate this man. Butterfly is more dangerous than you think"

He let out a sigh, raising from his chair. Lucas noticed once again that Mullendore was taller than most people. If he would have been half his age and half his weight, he would look like a warrior. But now he just looked like a jaded guardsman. Lucas could understand him well.

Mullendore appeared to be an honourable man, surrounded by liars.

Mullendore started to walk towards a small cupboard in the edge of his office and Lucas noticed that he walked with a small limp. The knight noticed his stare and a smirk appeared on his face.

"A spear, thrown by a fucking Stormlands soldier", he explained. "Ten years ago, Battle of Blackhaven. Not my first scar, not my last and certainly not my worst. But on bad days I can still feel it" He opened the cupboard's drawer, pulling out a bottle filled with a golden liquid.

"And today is a very bad day", he grumbled. "You want some Arbor Gold?" Lucas and Leonard exchanged a small look, before answering simultaneously. "Yes", Lucas answered, while Leonard shook his head. "No", the other knight said, causing Mullendore to raise an eyebrow.

"It's okay not to trust me", he chuckled. "Distrust comes naturally in this city. But distrusting a good Arbor Gold? You're behaving fishy, boy" Leonard gave him a frown. "I'm not thirsty", he answered. Mullendore shrugged. "Your loss" With these words, he pulled out two small cups, filling them with wine, before grabbing both of them and limping back to his table. He placed one of the cups in front of Lucas, giving both knights a stern look.

"Have you ever been to war?", he asked. "Do you know the sound of clashing steel, the noise of arrows flying through the air, the screams of dying people, all combined to a bitter cacophony? Do you know the moment when a man's life is worth less than his own shit?"

Lucas shook his head. "Luckily, I've never been to war. I fought in small skirmishes in Essos, but I never experienced a larger battle", he answered. "Neither have I", Leonard joined in. "Small skirmishes have been all for me, same as Flowers"

Mullendore's stern face got a somewhat pleased look. "I pray to the Stranger that none of you will ever experience a real war. Because that's what I have to deal with every fucking hour on every fucking day for the past thirty years. Blackhaven wasn't my worst battle. Oldtown is"

He raised the cup and Lucas did the same with his own. "To war! And to the lucky bastards who never experienced it!", Mullendore proclaimed, emptying his cup in a single gulp. "You want to leave this city, am I right?"

"As soon as possible", Leonard answered. Mullendore gave him a distanced nod. "Clever boy", he mumbled. "When I was tasked with bringing peace to this city, twenty years ago, I could have never imagined what kind of work that is. Today, I have two enemies, the Burned Man and Butterfly. The Burned Man is the more dangerous out of these, because Butterfly only targets other criminals, like a vigilante. Still, I found out the hard way that he is not interested in an alliance with me. And neither are you, if I interpret your behaviour correctly"

Lucas and Leonard changed a surprised look. "Ser Maron?", Lucas asked. Mullendore let out a sigh. "You know, I trust you more than most of my men out there. You are knights from the countryside. You have honour. Still, I know you don't trust me and I know you want to leave this city as soon as possible. And I can't even blame you for it"

He leant forwards in his chair, looking over Leonard's shoulder. As Lucas turned around, he saw Ryder standing in the door, holding a small sheet of paper. "Still, one question remains before I share the content of this letter with you. Have you found what you've been looking for? Have you found this boy Butterfly is going crazy about? Do you know where he is?"

[Don't reveal Dairon's location]

Alys

The arrow hit the tree right next to her, digging deep into the wood with a loud thud. Alys let out a scream, more out of surprise than out of actual terror. She wasn't someone who easily panicked, even though she had to admit that she was pretty close to breaking down right now. By lucky chance, the four men had found her as she was sitting down to eat a small loaf of bread. While she was able to gain a small advantage by being far lighter than the men, they were obviously better runners. For the past ten minutes, she had tried to escape her persecutors and up until now she was pretty sure that she made a good job. And then they started to shoot at her. Great. Fucking great. Just as she thought it couldn't get any worse.

Even though she had barely seen them, she had seen the man who was obviously their leader. At least back home, packs of wild dogs had an alpha male as their leader, the one who barked the loudest. And this man, in his early thirties, with short black hair and a plain-looking clean-shaven face, he was screaming the loudest, in obvious frenzy. Like wild dogs...

"You call that a shot, Hjalgar? I've seen you shooting that guy in the face without even aiming! Don't tell me you can't hit a moving target! Try harder, gods fucking damn it!", he shouted and continued to hoot in her direction. "You give me good sport, bitch! I will cut you, I will hurt you, I WILL CUT YOU TO PIECES!"

This caused her to run even faster, ignoring the pain in her sides and suppressing her fear of tumbling over some root. Tumbling over some root, what a thought! Only stupid little girls in the stories tend to trip over something when being chased, so that the shining hero could save her. But she was no stupid little girl and there was no shining hero in sight.

The darkness was her friend and her foe in this chase. Sadly, it wasn't dark enough to allow her to vanish into the darkness. On the other hand, it hindered her persecutors even more than it hindered her. Jumping over roots was easy for her, but the men were armed and wore heavy leather clothes. At least one of them had already fallen over and was dragging behind.

For a moment, she did not pay attention to the ground below her and of course it took this opportunity to fall away sharply right below her. She suppressed a scream as she lost her balance, falling down face forward, at least two metres deep, landing in a knee-deep pool of water. The only good thing in this situation was, that she already had been soaking wet before, from the rainstorm earlier. And at least the water cushioned her fall enough to prevent injuries. She quickly realized that she had fallen into a stream and as she raised her head, she saw that the men were unable to see her as long as she kept her head down.

"Where is she?", the pack leader asked. "She was here over there a moment ago", a second voice answered. Alys gulped, ignoring her heavily beating heart as she looked behind her, seeing a small hole in the dirt that edged the stream. As silent as possible, she started to crawl towards it, trying her best to make no noise in the water. The hole was located slightly above water level and while it was anything but dry, it was a welcome change compared to the cold water.

"Where the fuck is she?", the pack leader shouted and she heard footsteps above her. Tears were flowing down her face as she remembered home. Her little brother, as he ran towards her on his tiny legs, her father in the rare moments where he showed appreciation. Her mother, a distant memory from the past. She had died giving birth to her brother five years ago and still, Alys missed her dearly.

"Fucking stream...", the pack leader growled right above her. From his current position he wasn't able to see her, she knew it. She was shivering as she heard the footsteps coming closer. He was standing right at the edge, right above her and she knew, if he would look down directly, he could see her.

"Must have ran down that stream", he mumbled. "Hjalgar! You come with me, we go in that direction. Torvin and Gabin, you go in the other direction. She can't be far, she's tired and soaking wet, so I expect you to find her" She heard footsteps walking away from her position and let out a relieved breath. "When you find her, break her legs", the pack leader shouted from afar.

Just as Alys was about to relax, a deep voice above her caused her to tense up again. "Fucking maniac", a man said. "Hey, it was your suggestion to continue the hunt", a second man said.

"Harlan would have been fine with returning to Harrenhal"

"It's not Harlan I'm worried about", the first one admitted. "His brother on the other hand... he was close to kill me and I guess he would have no problems in killing Harlan too. Disobeying him would be unwise"

"Aye", the second one agreed. "I almost pity Harlan..." He was cut off by the first man. "No", he growled. "If you ever pity him again, think about what he does in the dungeons, together with

Holt. Perhaps he would have turned out different without Harren and Harmund. But the... monster he is right now doesn't deserve any pity"

"I hope he won't get her", the second voice said again. "He won't", the first man answered. "Why are you so sure?", the second man asked. "Because he is walking in the wrong direction" With these words, she heard footsteps right above her and before she could do anything, a man jumped down into the water in front of her. He was tall, muscular, built like a warrior. His hair was black and fell over his shoulders, his massive black beard fell down to his chest. He looked at her out of his dark brown eyes and Alys started to shiver. She frantically shook her head in despair, trying to crawl further into the hole. "Because she is right here", the man growled. "Fuck", the second man said from above. "What are we going to do? I... I can't watch this" The man in front of her shook his head. "Easy, Gabin", he growled, before glaring at Alys again. "Under any other circumstance, I would do what I was told. But not for him. Today's your lucky day, girl"

She gave him a surprised look. "Wha... what? What are...", she stuttered, but was cut off by him laying a finger on his mouth. "Run, little girl. Don't look back" He stepped aside and didn't need to continue. Alys gave him a look of confusion, mixed with heartfelt thankfulness. She didn't understand what just happened, but she ran, she ran for her life.

"She's not here, Harlan!", the man shouted as she was out of sight. Tears of relief flew down her face as she ran. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to lie down, to sleep for a moment. But she pushed herself to continue running, jumping over roots, ignoring the pain.

And then she saw the end of the forest appearing in front of her. Without even thinking, she ran out of it, onto the moonlit road, collapsing in it's middle. It was only then that she noticed the riders that were slowly approaching her. For a moment, she froze in shock, her eyes wide opened, her body trembling with fear. She tried to stand up and her legs finally yielded, leaving her to collapse once more on the road. No, no, it mustn't end like this! Not now! She saw the riders approaching, slowly, carefully. No!

She counted three riders as she struggled to stand up and finally succumbed to her panic. The three men stopped their horses and one of them, probably their leader, descended from his horse. She got a closer look at him and saw that he was a handsome man, probably about thirty years old. His hair was tied to a short ponytail and as black as his well-trimmed beard. Across his left cheek, he had a noticeable scar that almost split his left ear. He was wearing elegant, black clothes and a fur coat, almost giving him the appearance of a nobleman. And what truly put her off was the polite smile on his face.

"Good evening", he greeted her, offering his hand to help her up. She gave him a suspicious glare, unsure if she should accept his gesture or continue trying to crawl away from him. "Who are you?", she hissed with a hostile tone in his voice. The man raised an eyebrow. "Is there a

reason for your fear?", he asked. "I hope it's not because of me. I can assure you, I mean you no harm"

She finally took enough courage to grab his outstretched hand, immediately being pulled to her feet. The stranger held her hand in a strong, but gentle grip, giving her a polite smile. "My name is Edward Anturion", he introduced himself. "I am a traveller, currently on my way to the castle of Harrenhal. Could you tell me why you were running away?"

"I was...", she panted. "I was being hunted..." She stopped, finally noticing her ruined clothes.

The once fine leather was now stained with mud and soaking wet. Edward followed her stare and in a quick movement he took off his heavy cloak, laying it around her shoulders. It took her a moment to stop shivering, but she gave him a thankful smile.

"See?", Edward said with a smirk. "Much better. You have a pretty smile, young lady. You should show it more often" His smirk vanished. "But I have to ask, why are you out here?"

As Alys started to speak, she noticed that her voice was still a bit cracking and she felt dizzy.

Seven Hells, she couldn't afford getting ill now! "Do you know a man who is called Harmund Hoare?", she asked carefully. Edward frowned as he heard this. "I've heard enough of him", he answered. "Say no more. You're safe now. He won't dare to attack you while you are under my protection"

This caught her attention and her suspicious glare returned. "He is a king's son. Why would he refrain from attacking you?" Edward flashed her a quick smile. "Because I have business with his father and the king would be very displeased if something would happen to me and my men" He raised a hand and the other two riders approached. "Ah, but excuse my manners. Here I am, talking to such a lovely young lady without introducing my bodyguards" As they came closer, Alys saw that one of the riders was a woman. She had boyish short hair in a common brown tone and even in the darkness Alys could see that she was not a very good looking woman. Her face was long and gaunt, with small scars giving away that she had seen a fair share of battles. The man next to her had very short dark brown hair and a matching stubble. While the woman had two swords strapped to her horse, the man was casually wielding a crossbow. Neither of them was looking as friendly as Edward, albeit they didn't look hostile either.

"To the left we have Carvin Granver, a good friend of mine", he explained. "To the right we have Lady Alisa Karstark" This caused the woman to frown, while Alys froze in shock. Alisa Karstark! She knew her, everyone in the North knew her. Lord Karstark's thirdborn daughter, Alisa the Kinslayer, who ran away from Karhold after killing her own brother! And Alys even recognized her. It has been twelve years ago, when her father took her to a trip to Karhold. Back then, Alisa had long hair, no scars and a bright smile... for a moment Alys wondered what happened to her in the past twelve years.

“May I ask for your name, young lady?”, Edward asked politely and Alys realized that Alisa would recognize her name. What would she do? Surely she wouldn't send her back home, right?

[Tell them your real name]

John

Out of the corner of his eye, John saw that Temari was checking out the barmaid. She was pretty in her own way, he had to give her that. No real beauty and he had never been a fan of short hair, but she had intriguing features and the way she moved... still, she was no Cass. She wasn't even close. No one was.

“Seven Hells, Tem”, Behara hissed, slightly punching her brothers shoulder. She immediately noticed what she did as Temari cringed and a pained expression flashed over his face. “Fuck, I'm sorry...”, she mumbled. Temari shook his head. “It's okay, sis”, he answered, giving John an apologizing look. Why did they all feel the need to pity him? Temari, Behara, even Aylard who had lost so much. But their attempts at consoling him came off as clumsy and he didn't need them. The only one who made him feel better was Janae and he loved her for it.

During the past days, they had travelled to Raylansfair, accompanying Aylard and his family. It had been a hard decision for the innkeeper to leave his beloved inn behind, but he had wasted no time to bring a load of stuff with him. His warhammer was leaning at his side right now and the room he had rented for himself, Sawyer, Gunel and Kyette was filled with their belongings. Among them was the large harp that had belonged to Aylard's wife. On their first evening at the inn, Cass had played for him and he had immediately taken a liking to her.

“John”, Janae softly said and he noticed that he was staring bleakly at the wall. “Drink something” Even though he still felt like shit, on the outside and on the inside, a smile found it's way on his face. She knew exactly what he needed right now. He raised his hand, giving a signal to the barmaid. His wounds had healed well, albeit he would keep a number of scars on his face. Well, it hadn't been a pretty face anyway. Still, as he raised his hand, he was still able to feel Bear's knives in his shoulders. Behara had been certain that no permanent damage was done, but it sure as hell felt like it.

“What can I get you?”, the barmaid asked as she approached them. Temari gave her a big grin, much to Behara's visible annoyance. “Well, good evening”, he said with a voice that was probably supposed to be charming. Just like she did for Gutten, Behara had tried her best to patch Temari up. John had insisted to give Temari the rest of the Milk of the Poppy they bought in Pentos a few months ago. The effect still hadn't worn off completely and the mercenary was more jovial than usual and far more usual than he should be, all things considered.

The barmaid narrowed her eyes. "What can I get you?", she repeated in annoyance. "My name is Temari Keys", he answered. "What is yours?" The barmaid gave Janae a short glare, apparently viewing the woman as the one with the most authority on the table. She wasn't exactly wrong.

"That's enough, Temari", she growled and the mercenary focused his attention on her. The barmaid let out a small sigh. "Ilish", she answered. "My name is Ilish Granver. What can I get you?" She paused for a moment. "And that's the last time I'm going to ask"

"Seven jugs of ale", Janae answered, looking at Aylard and his family, who sat across her. The innkeeper gave her a short nod. "Yes, seven jugs", she confirmed again. The barmaid nodded before leaving, politely ignoring Temari staring at her ass.

"I'm going to punch you again, Tem", Behara mumbled, forcing her brother's attention. Janae grinned as she heard this, albeit her grin vanished again as she noticed that Gutten was still looking sullenly. "Seven fucking Hells, John Gutten", she moaned. "You want to look like that when we're going to meet that self-proclaimed lord?"

"Won't make that much of a difference", Temari interjected. "Jaro and I'Lian are still somewhere out there and Sammy is in Oldtown. He hired six of us, he got three. John is hardly in a condition to fight and I've been better. The lord is not going to be pleased"

"Pleasing the lord is not my intention", Janae answered. "Fulfilling the contract on the other hand... Do you even realize that we can get into serious trouble because of that?" John raised his head, but before he was able to answer, Aylard spoke. "John did the right thing", the innkeeper said. Janae rolled her eyes. "Of course you see it that way. But Sammy is an important part of our team and she's out there getting your daughter back"

"Enough, Janae", John growled, causing her to go silent. She understood immediately that she has almost crossed a line and he could tell that she felt sorry for it. "Sammy is not in Oldtown for Aylard or for me. She's there for Cass" This was enough to silence both, Janae and Aylard.

"She is going to bring her back to you", Behara said after a moment, softly touching Aylard's shoulder. The innkeeper forced himself to smile at her. "I know", he answered, even though John could tell that he was worried. "I just can't stop thinking about what's going to become of us"

"What do you mean?", Behara asked kindly. Aylard let out a sigh. "A few days ago I owned an inn on a central road in the Reach. It wasn't an easy life, but it was nonetheless a good one. Lunett was going to take over one day. Sawyer was destined to support her as good as he could. Kytte and Gunel had a steady work. What's left of that now?"

"Bad things tend to happen", Janae answered, staring at the table in front of her. "No need to let them drag you down" She looked up to Aylard. "You're alive because we saved you. Now do me

the favour and spare me a tale of all the things you've lost. This is Raylansfair, I'm sure you'll find work here”

“Enough, both of you”, John groaned, looking for the barmaid. He really needed to drink a lot now. Of course, he had thought about the meeting with the lord during the past days, but he had other things on his mind right now. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw her again, lying on the ground. He knew, her last look before the life vanished from her eyes would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life.

“We have to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Aylard, I wish you the best of luck for the future. I hope Sammy finds your daughter, but that's going to be the last time we will deal with each other. Build a new life, for you and for your family”, he explained and the innkeeper gave him a nod. “I will, John”, he promised. “It's going to be hard, but we will manage. Perhaps Kyette can find work here at the tavern, while I think about joining the city guard”

“You should do that”, Behara said with a sweet smile. “Perhaps we could even help you!” This caused Janae and Temari to look up immediately. “What do you mean by that, Hara?”, Temari asked carefully. Janae let out a sigh. “You got to be kidding me...”, she mumbled. “We've done enough”

Behara shook her head. “You might see it that way. But these people lost their home and a good part of their belongings. They have nothing, while we have the opportunity to help them out”, she insisted. “And why should we do that?”, Janae asked. “Because it's the only decent thing to do”, the girl answered. Janae chuckled. On moments like this, John envied Behara a little bit. Sure, she proved once again that she had more of a child inside of her than her eighteen years of age showed. But she also proved that she had remained a good person, despite all the things she had witnessed. John stopped being a good man years ago, on Orkmont. And on some days he suspected that Janae had never been a good person in her life. Not that he could blame here. Still... he slightly envied Behara for being better than he could ever be.

“Come on, John”, she said. “I'm not asking for you to give them all of our money. But we could pay for their room, at least until Aylard or Kyette found work” Janae gave her a cold glare, before looking back at John. “Can you please just order her to stop being ridiculous?”, she said with a frown.

“I'm ridiculous?”, Behara asked and her voice gained some sharpness. “Compassion is not a bad thing, you should try it” She looked at John again. “Just let us pay the rent for their room. We can afford it easily, we have more money than we need and it would help them a lot. Think about it, what would you do if Cass would sit with you at this table” “Hara...”, Janae hissed immediately, shooting an apologizing stare to John, who stared bleakly at the girl again.

[Pay for Aylard's room]

Maya

The man walked closer to her position, slowly and completely unaware of her presence. He still hadn't spotted her, albeit it was only a matter of time until he would. Maya knew, trying to hide deeper in the bushes was no option, as the danger of being spotted by Rodrik and Bear was too high. Still, it took her a lot of courage to give Irving a nod. What if he would miss? Oh, dear gods, she put her life in the hands of the most useless person she ever encountered! Irving's arrow hit the man at the right temple, digging deep into his skull and killing him immediately. He didn't even had time to scream, albeit his body made a muffled sound as he fell to the ground, causing Rodrik to listen up.

"What was that?", he growled. Bear chuckled slightly as he turned his head towards the bushes. Maya could see the thirst for blood in his dark eyes and for a moment she feared that he would see her. "I told you I have a man out there", he answered, turning his head back to Rodrik. Maya let out a sigh of relief, before looking at Irving, who put his thumb up, grinning widely. She gave him a thankful nod and turned her head back to the fire, so that she could continue to listen what Rodrik and Bear might say.

"So, Anturion is in the Riverlands?", Bear asked. Rodrik gave him a nod. "Two of my men, Carvin and Alisa are with him", he explained. "To protect him, but also to keep an eye on him. I don't trust pirates"

"You got a man who's fucking name is Alisa?", Bear asked, grinning widely. Rodrik gave him a slightly irritated nod. "One of my mercenaries, a woman and one of the best damn fighters I know", he answered. "You got a problem with that?"

Bear shook his head. "Not at all", he answered. "But you really give an important task to a woman? You're fucking crazy!" He let out a short laughter, that got even louder as Rodrik frowned. The fallen knight stayed silent until Bear's laughter stopped as suddenly as it started. "Back to business", he proclaimed as the other man went silent. "A hundred golden hands for you, seventy for each your five highest ranking underlings, fifty for the rest and you can keep everything you pillage. That's Anturion's offer"

"Generous fucking offer", Bear growled. "And all we have to do is to burn that puny town to the ground?" Rodrik gave him a nod. "With help from my mercenaries and hopefully with additional help from Harren Hoare"

The mentioning of the dreaded tyrant caused Maya to shiver. What kind of conspiracy did she just stumble upon? Mercenaries, bandits and now a king, all conspiring to destroy a small town? She noticed that her hands were shaking as she was trying her best to understand what the two men were talking about.

"And Blacksails?", Bear asked. "What's his opinion about Anturion's ambition?" Rodrik shrugged. "Aeron Blacksails has more important things to worry about. He does not care what his captains plan as long as he gets his share of the loot", he answered.

"Fucking hate pirates", Bear growled and spat on the ground. Rodrik gave him a nod. "Fucking hate pirates", he confirmed. "Blacksails will get a sizeable part of the loot, in exchange for his help" He looked towards the bushes and for a moment, Maya was sure that he narrowed his eyes. "You will travel to the Riverlands. Meet up with Anturion at Harrenhal. He has more detailed orders for you and your men"

"And what are you going to do?", Bear asked and slightly raised from the ground, looking towards the bushes. Looking at Maya. Startled, she started to crawl back, trying to make as little noise as possible. "What is it?", Rodrik asked, putting a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Something's not right", Bear growled. "Kevan!" He took a step towards the bushes and this time he looked a bit longer at the bush Maya was still hiding in. "Hey, Kevan! Where the fuck are you?" He looked once again at the bushes and Maya knew immediately that he had seen her this time. "What the...", he started to say but cut himself off as Maya jumped up, running away from the small camp.

"Intruder!", Bear shouted behind her. "Get them!" She heard the sound of weapons being drawn and ran faster towards Irving, whose triumphant grin vanished the moment he saw her.

"What's...", he started, but Maya cut him off by grabbing his shoulder. "We need to get out here", she hissed. "Stay silent, move fast"

"What... what have you done again?", he moaned. His face went pale as he looked over her shoulder. "Fuck!", he shouted. "What the fuck have you done?" And then he started to run. Maya had to change her earlier opinion on him as she saw him running. He wasn't useless, not entirely. He was a good shot with a bow, but he was even better at running away from danger. While she was running after Irving, she took a quick glance over her shoulder herself, seeing two men chasing after her. The darkness worked to her advantage now, as she wasn't able to see Bear or Rodrik, just as they weren't able to see her. On the other hand, she had Irving, who was able to see far better in this darkness, running safely through the darkness. She only had to follow him. Slowly she realized that she had been saved by Irving... Seven Hells, she could only hope that Gregar would never learn about that. He would ridicule her for weeks!

In front of her, Irving let out a short scream and fell to the ground, causing her to nearly trip over him. He lay on the ground and even in the darkness she was able to see the pained expression on his face as he put his hands on his knee.

For a short moment, Maya thought about leaving him here. It would be easy. Irving, as pathetic as he was, would probably be able to hold them off for a while, in a desperate attempt so safe his life. She would be safe...

And then she realized what she was thinking and her cheeks turned red in embarrassment. She stopped in front of him, turning around to face the two men chasing her, pulling out her daggers. "Can you stand up?", she hissed over her shoulder, in Irving's direction. "Y... yes", he stuttered, slowly getting back on his feet again.

The men chasing her had almost reached her position. They were tall and buff, looking as if they had lived on the roads for quite some time. One of them, a dark-skinned man with long dark hair, was armed with a spiked club. His companion, a slightly smaller fair-skinned man with a crooked grin on his face, was armed with a hatchet.

"Look who we have here", the dark-skinned man said. "A cunt and a little fatty" He looked at his companion. "Dibs on the pretty one. You can take fatty if you want to" The smaller man shook his head, his grin still on his face. "Bear is going to want her", he stated as he started to walk around Maya at an appropriate distance, while she was carefully eyeing them, her daggers raised.

"Oh gods...", Irving mumbled. "We're going to die. We're both going to die. This is all your fault!" He jumped up, pulling out a small knife, desperately looking at the men. "Please, don't take me! I have nothing to do with that! Take her, leave me alone!"

Maya narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, while the men started to laugh. "We got a brave one here", the smaller man said. "I'm going to gut you like a pig, fatty" With these words, he jumped in Irving's direction, trying to embed his hatchet in his skull. Irving let out a scream as he staggered backwards and Maya knew he wouldn't survive this attack if she wouldn't intervene. She took a quick step past him, getting between him and his opponent, while pushing him to the ground and dodging the strike at the same time.

Her opponent let out a frustrated groan and Maya noticed that the dark-skinned man behind her charged at her. She quickly jumped to the side, trying to evade the attack, barely parrying a strike from the hatchet in the process. Before she could do another move, she heard a surprised scream coming from the dark-skinned man. She and the smaller man both looked in his direction at the same moment, seeing him slowly sinking to the ground. An arrow was sticking out of his chest and Maya was able to see a figure standing a few metres behind him, a bow in his hand.

"What the...", the smaller man said, ignoring Maya for a moment. This was his last mistake, as she quickly rammed one of her daggers into his ribs and pressed the other one under his chin. "No!", he managed to exclaim before she slit his throat.

Next to her, Irving staggered back to his feet, looking from her to the archer in front of them. Maya pointed her daggers at the stranger, unsure how to react at first. As he slowly walked forwards, Maya noticed that Irving was slowly moving behind her. "That's close enough!", she shouted, prompting the man to stop. She saw that he was younger than she thought, with black

hair and a short beard. He was armed with a bow, albeit he had raised his hands, indicating that he wasn't a threat.

"Easy", he said. "I don't intend to harm you" He had a soft voice and the look in his dark eyes sounded honest enough to cause Maya to lower her daggers. "Who are you?", she growled, still suspicious of who this man might be.

"My name is Christian Thomas", he introduced himself. "I'm a ranger in service of House Raylan. You're on Lord Raylan's land" He pointed at the dead men. "I have encountered these men a few hours ago and followed them, trying to find out their intentions. And while doing that, I witnessed you fleeing from them" A smirk appeared on his face. "You stirred up quite the hornet's nest back there"

Maya frowned as she heard this. She and Irving exchanged a quick look. "Then we should leave immediately", she concluded, looking back at Christian. "I... thank you for your help. I doubt any of us would have survived without your help" She hesitated for a moment, pressing her lips together. "Perhaps... you are a ranger, right?", she asked. Christian gave her a nod, raising an eyebrow. "Perhaps, would you be willing to lead us out of here? We have a two friends at the eastern edge of the forest. Together we plan to travel to Raylansfair"

Christian's smirk turned into an honest smile and he took a quick bow in front of her. "Mylady, it would be an honour to be your guide. In exchange, I'd like you to tell me what you know about the plans these people made", he offered. Maya gave him a nod. "We have a deal", she answered, as she suddenly remembered something. No, someone.

"Shit", she muttered. "I almost forgot Dimitri" She looked at Irving. "They are searching this forest because of us..." "You", Irving cut her off. "They never saw me" He gave her a proud smile, ignoring her irritated frown. "Anyway, you are telling me you want to go back for that philosopher guy? He's not our problem. Let's just follow the friendly man over there, to safety. Besides, he was annoying and I don't want to spend any more time with him"

Maya raised a brow in mockery as she heard this. "You're telling me he annoyed you?", she asked and Irving gave her a nod. "Yeah, are you implying something? Now come on and get the hell out of here, he's not our problem"

[Agree to leave Dimitri behind]

Drent

"Pig pens for me", Drent exclaimed. "I'm not missing that opportunity!" Montclair's mouth formed a rare smirk and he gave him a nod. "Then I'm going to search for the Maester. Wouldn't want the noble ambassador to bleed to death" Both of them looked to the honour table, where Ambassador Celtigar was still lying unconscious. Princess Argella had slightly moved her plate

away from him, so that she could continue to eat without having to worry about blood on her dress. Her father gave Drent a pleased look as he started to walk towards the table.

"You want to escort our guests?", Argilac asked. Drent gave him a nod. "Yes, your grace", he answered and the Storm King quickly patted him on the back. It felt like a horse walking over his spine. "Good man", he complimented him. "What's your name?"

"Drent Golton, your grace", Drent answered. "Then make sure to put them into the dirtiest and smelliest pig pen we have. Should remind them of home", Argilac growled and a quick smile flashed across the princess' mouth as she looked up from her plate. Her deep blue eyes looked at Drent and for a moment it appeared as if she was looking right through him.

"Make sure that they have it comfortable. Give them some pigs to mate with, or whatever they do all day on their puny island", the king snarled, causing Drent to look back at him. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw the Storm Princess smirking.

Drent saluted in front of him, before walking towards the Valyrian table. The four men around it were slowly raising from their chairs, apparently unsure what was about to happen to them.

"You... you can't mean to...", their leader stuttered, but Drent cut him off. "The Storm King can, mylords", he answered, pointing at the doors of the Great Hall. "Now, if you could please follow me. Behave and nobody gets hurt"

A quick glance towards the mutilated ambassador was enough to destroy any thought of resistance the Valyrians might have. Still, their glares were more than hostile, mainly towards Drent. He noticed that they didn't even look towards Storm King and Princess, presumably out of fear. They were indeed more clever than the ambassador.

Slowly and carefully, they walked towards the Great Hall. Drent saw the smirking faces of the soldiers and he caught himself grinning more than once. But for every dozen smirking faces, he caught one worried face. These were the clever ones, he realized. The ones who knew what this could lead to. Argilac Durrandon was a proud man and his daughter was an even prouder woman. But Aegon Targaryen was the last dragonlord of Old Valyria. He wasn't someone who would react kindly to the events that happened today. And unlike any other potential enemy the Storm King could make, Aegon had dragons. He had the means to pose a serious threat to the Stormlands, even if Argilac the Arrogant saw it differently. Drent loved and respected the Storm King, but the man had clearly overreacted today. Even his daughter would have most likely been satisfied if he had simply knocked the man out. But what he did today could have dire consequences.

The Valyrians complied and followed him out of the hall peacefully. It was not as if they had any choice. They silently descended the stair that lead from Storm's End's tower down to the courtyard. About fifty men were still standing guard at this late hour and barely anyone paid attention to him. However, as Drent was slowly leading the men towards the pig pen, a large

wooden building located on the western side of the castle, he noticed one man who slowly approached him.

Drent let out a sigh. He knew this man and he did not like him at all. It was a tall man, muscular, with a handsome face and the silver blonde hair those of valyrian descent typically displayed. A scar on his left temple went down next to his eye towards his chin. "Evening, Drentie", he greeted him. Drent slightly rolled his eyes. "Garen", he muttered. Garen was a mercenary in the Storm King's service, a personal confidante of Argilac's good friend Ser Baron Schodek. In Drent's eyes, he was little more than a ruthless cutthroat, like all mercenaries were. But even more than his profession, Drent hated his constant mockery.

"I see you got some pretty pigs to keep you company", the mercenary said with a big grin. "I heard quite the turmoil in the Great Hall. You want to tell me what happened?" Drent shook his head. "No", he simply said, continuing his walk towards the pig pens. Unfortunately, Garen remained stubborn. "Come on, don't leave me hanging here. What happened?"

Drent tried his best to ignore him, but one of the Valyrian's answered instead. "Your king did something terrible", he explained and Drent rolled with his eyes. Garen raised an eyebrow and pressed his lips together. "Something terrible, I see. Care to explain what exactly?"

"He cut off the hands of the noble Corilyan Celtigar, Lord Aegon's ambassador and personal friend", the man continued to explain and Garen's grin got even wider. He slightly chuckled. "He mutilated an ambassador? That's stupid, even for him" He quickly looked around, smirking at Drent. "With all due respect, of course"

"Lord Aegon will hear of this", the valyrian threatened as Drent entered the pig pen, looking for the dirtiest and smelliest of them. "He won't leave this unpunished! He will call his bannermen and he will take this castle, with fire and blood!"

This caused Drent and Garen to chuckle in unison, a rare moment. "The gods of storm and sea couldn't bring this castle down", Drent said as he opened the door to one of the pig pens. The pigs inside gave him only a mildly interested look as they lay in the mud, oinking curiously as the first of the valyrian's reluctantly entered the pig pen. "What makes you think Aegon will succeed where even gods failed?"

"Your old gods are not here, soldier, they are not even real", the valyrian answered defiantly.

"Lord Aegon on the other hand is a week's flight away, on Dragonstone. And I can assure you, his dragons are very real and their fire will burn through your halls. It will consume you, it will consume your king, his army and his Storm Bitch of a daugh..." He didn't manage to continue as the shaft of Drent's spear hit him in the face, sending him falling into the mud.

"I thought you've learned a lesson about insulting the princess. Consider yourself lucky that I'm not her father", Drent growled, turning around and walking towards the door. Garen followed him, grinning like an imbecile. "So, he cut off the hands of a peaceful ambassador?", he asked

and Drent gave him an annoyed nod. "He did", he answered shortly, trying to keep his conversation with Garen as short as possible.

"As much as I enjoyed seeing that pig in the mud, I have to agree with him. That was a dangerous move", Garen said and his ever present smirk vanished. "He can do this with that dornish toad, he can do it with the Gardener king, perhaps even with Harren the Black. But insulting a man who rides a dragon large enough to swallow half a dozen men at once? What was the terrible thing the ambassador did?"

"He insulted the princess", Drent answered. "Offered her a bastard as a potential suitor" Garen started to chuckle again, to Drent's annoyance. "He offered Argella Durrandon a bastard? I always thought the dragonlord was a cunning man. No wonder the Storm King overreacted" His smirk vanished and for a moment he looked genuinely worried. "But in all seriousness, why would a man as savvy as Aegon Targaryen do such a thing? That was to be expected, wasn't it? Or perhaps he expected it indeed, only looking for an excuse to start a war against the Stormlands"

He let out a frustrated sigh. "If we burn to death, I know who I should blame. You agree with me, Drentie?" His infuriating smirk returned as he slightly patted Drent on the shoulder. "Or perhaps you want to be a good little soldier, agreeing with everything your beloved king does"

Drent narrowed his eyes. "What are you implying?", he asked slowly. Garen shrugged. "Nothing, Drentie. But you have to admit that it was a bit extreme, right? I mean, punching him, okay, but cutting off his hands? That's pretty much a declaration of war, all because someone said something mean about his precious daughter"

Drent pressed his lips together. He had a strong dislike for Garen's attitude, especially towards the king. It was a good thing that the mercenary had never talked to Argilac before, or else his head would have probably ended on a spike long ago.

[Disagree with Garen]

Jaron

The morning sun was already brightly illuminating the room when Jaron woke up. It took him a short moment to orient himself. He wasn't in the small cabin aboard the Pale Princess, where he rested in over the course of the last week. No, this room was furnished like a nobleman's bedroom, or perhaps at least like a nobleman's guest room. He was at the Burned Man's house and judging from what he attempted to do today, this might be his last morning before he would meet the Seven.

The last evening passed quietly. He had resisted to beat Robb up and he was proud about it. A true hero wouldn't beat a defeated and defenceless man. He had shown mercy, albeit Robb was less than thankful. And he had met Ellena. Seeing her again still worried him more than anything. He was glad that Martin went with her to protect her from the things that lurked in the streets, but he was heavily displeased to see her as an errand girl for the Burned Man. She deserved better.

Harpy had tried to reassure him of course and now, after a good night of sleep he had to admit that she was good at talking. She had managed to calm him down, with soft and soothing words. And for every word she had said, Robb had grinned at him as if that was the funniest thing he had seen in ages. Judging from his default frown, this was probably true.

And Robb... as much as Jaron hated this man, he was pivotal for their plan. As Harpy had told him when she had shown him his room late last night, it didn't matter if Robb was on their side or not. He knew only half of their plan and even if he intended to betray them, he had no time to do it until it was too late for Butterfly to prevent anything. The way Harpy explained it to him made him believe her. Now in the morning, he realized that he just wanted to believe her. Or perhaps he just wanted to fight for something with a meaning for once. A just cause, no matter the people he had to ally himself with. Criminals, cutthroats, sellswords... what mattered was that the man they were up against was easily worse than all of them combined.

Jaron looked up as the door to his room was opened. He saw Martin entering the room, a worried look on his face. "Good morning", he mumbled with a sullen voice. "Harpy is waiting in the main hall and Robb should be back soon. Are you ready to die?" Jaron shook his head. "Don't think so", he answered. "Besides, what makes you so sure I'm going to die today?" Martin shrugged and did not answer at first. Jaron raised from his bed, quickly putting on a shirt and his trousers. Just as he thought that Martin would stay silent, the mercenary began to speak again. "I'm not sure that you are going to die today, but it's entirely possible. You should be prepared for it", he mumbled with a sullen voice.

"You disapprove of her plan?", Jaron asked and Martin shook his head. "I disapprove of my role in it. Hiding like a coward, leaving her at the mercy of a man who could make the Stranger shiver" He pressed his lips together, avoiding to look at Jaron.

"You're not hiding like a coward and you know that", Jaron insisted. A joyless smile flashed across Martin's face. "I've always told myself it would be no big deal for me to see her in danger, that I would hold no loyalty beyond the money towards anyone", he answered and his bleak stare met Jaron's. "I should be with her when she faces this man. Instead she chose you" His voice sounded bitter for a moment and he seemed to notice it. A hint of regret found its way into his eyes. "I don't mean to sound angry at you. It's just... I know you're going to fight like a dragon, but you are..."

"Wounded?", Jaron asked, carefully moving his left arm. It felt a lot better today, but he doubted that he could hold a shield with his hand. Martin gave him a nod. "Aye", he answered. "You are a good man, Jaron. But you are hardly in any condition to fight"

"Perhaps I don't need to", Jaron stated. "If you do your part correctly, everything will be fine" Martin gave him a sad smile. "Perhaps", he admitted. "Come on, don't let her wait" He turned around and Jaron followed him. For the first time since he met him, he noticed a crack in Martin's usually jovial smile. The mercenary was genuinely distraught over Harpy's plan. Her plan... to call it daring or risky would be an understatement. Currently, Robb was arranging a meeting with Butterfly himself, a meeting between him, Jaron and Harpy. She had explained it at least a dozen times to him over the past evening and still, he did not like it any more. Jaron would pretend to work with Robb, to defect to Butterfly and his men. Harpy would play a scared prisoner, luring Butterfly into a trap. She had told Robb that she intended to kill Butterfly herself as soon as he would let his guard down. She hadn't told him that Himani would follow them, to find out where they would meet. She hadn't told him that Himani would inform Martin about their location, who would in turn lead a group of mercenaries to them, rushing in to save the day. It was more than risky and Jaron did not like it at all. But the alternative would have been to leave her alone and he couldn't do that.

They entered the main hall and Jaron saw Harpy looking out of a large window towards the small courtyard of the mansion. She looked even paler than usual, the cold autumn sunlight highlighting her dark hair. As she turned around, Jaron saw dark rings under her eyes, indicating that she found a lot less sleep than he did. A smile flashed across her face, but it failed to reach her eyes as she walked closer towards them. "Good morning, sleepyhead", she said with a forced smirk. "Glad you decided to show up"

"Wouldn't miss the show, would I?", Jaron answered, failing at sounding any less worried than she did. Despite this, Harpy's smirk turned into a full smile for a second, vanishing as quick as it came. "Robb should be back soon. We need to get you ready", she explained, looking over her shoulder towards the window with an almost haunted look on her face.

She glanced at Martin and for a moment, the two simply looked at each other in silence. It was Martin who looked away first, staring at the floor without saying a word. "Where's the Burned Man?", Jaron asked. For a moment, he saw something that seemed to be regret in her eyes.

"He's sleeping", she answered. "Sleeping?", Jaron asked, raising an eyebrow.

Instead of answering, Harpy grabbed his healthy arm, gently pulling him out of the room.

"Sleeping", she insisted again as they walked down the hallway, passing the door that lead to the Burned Man's room. "I gave him undiluted milk of the poppy. He's going to be out cold for the next hours, or else he would stop me"

"He disapproves of your plan?", Jaron asked in surprise. She gave him a nod and he saw the reluctance in her movement. "He's not ready to do what it takes to defeat Butterfly. He is not willing to put me in a situation where I could end this war, out of fear that he might lose me" "Perhaps you shouldn't do it then", Jaron insisted, immediately noticing the displeased look in her eyes. "You don't approve of this either?", she asked and he shook his head. For a moment, Harpy looked hurt. "You don't need to approve of it", she hissed. "You just need to help me" She stopped in front of a large door and Jaron put a hand on her shoulder. He felt her tensing up under his touch, albeit she relaxed immediately "I will", he promised and for the first time this morning he saw her genuinely smiling at him. "Thank you", she mumbled.

She opened the door and Jaron saw that the room behind it was some sort of armoury, more like a collection of weapons and armour. Valuable westerosi long swords hanged on the wall, next to arakhs, ghiscari scimitars and braavosi foils. In the centre of the room stood an armour stand that immediately aroused Jaron's attention, holding the finest armour he had ever laid his eyes upon. It was a grey armour crafted in the elegant style wealthy noblemen from the Reach preferred, with subtle golden engravings that formed a pattern on the steel.

Harpy noticed his stare and smiled as she pulled him closer to the armour. "Sadly, a helmet is not included", she said and chuckled as he gave her a surprised glance. "It's a gift! A knight needs protection, right? I tried to arrange for your old armour to be brought here, but sadly the condition it's in won't assure your safety"

"And... and you can just give this away?", Jaron asked. Harpy looked from him to the armour and shrugged. "It's not like me or the Burned Man have any use for it either way. I doubt he would disapprove and I doubt I would care. It's a gift for a friend"

A short laughter found its way out of her throat and she softly pushed him towards the armour. "Don't stand around like a donkey, put it on!", she urged him and Jaron reluctantly complied. He still did not like her plan, but the thought of wearing this armour for battle filled him with pride. If there was one thing he was always lacking in his life as a hedge knight, it was a fine set of armour. And this seemed to be right out of the legends he used to worship when he was a child. He looked back at Harpy who gave him an affectionate smile. "Put it on!", she urged him again. "You don't need help, do you?"

His mouth formed a slight smirk at her remark and he carefully started to put the armour on. Being limited to use his right arm handicapped him more than he wanted to admit and several times he had to use the left arm for support, letting out pained sighs as he put too much weight on his wounds more than once. Still, he had the opinion that he did well despite his wounds. Harpy seemed to see this differently, as he saw her watching him with a worried look on her face every time he made any noise.

The real problem came when he had to put on the parts of his armour where he couldn't use his right hand for. Putting on the right pauldron took him several minutes and tying the gauntlet down was something he wasn't even able to do without significantly stressing his wounded arm. He tried to pull the strings that were supposed to strap the gauntlet to his right forearm, only to let out a moan as hot pain flashed through his left arm, causing him to stagger backwards. Harpy darted towards him, grabbing his shoulders and preventing him from going down on his knees. Her dark brown eyes looked at him with a worried expression in them and she gently grabbed his right arm with both of her hands. "May I?", she asked softly. He gave her a short nod, trying not to show his pain in front of her, as she started to tie the glove with quick and experienced movements. "You know how to do this, right?", he asked.

A pained expression flashed over her face and Jaron already regretted that he had asked her. She gave him a short nod. "Haven't done it in a long time", she mumbled and closed her eyes. "But I grew up helping men into their armour. There are things you don't forget" The short melancholic expression on her face went away as she looked back at him. "By the gods, take a look at you", she exclaimed with a bright smile. "Oh, one more thing!" With these words, she quickly ran to the wall, taking an elegant longsword from it, before triumphantly returning to him. The sword was long, with a straight blade forged out of bright steel. For a short moment, Jaron thought it would be Valyrian steel, but this foolish thought vanished quickly. Still, it was a remarkable blade, fitting for someone who wore an armour like that. "Now you look like a true knight!", Harpy exclaimed as she was helping him girding the blade.

"You're implying I'm not a true knight already?", Jaron asked with a smirk, watching how the smile on her face vanished. "That was not what I...", she started to justify herself, before noticing the smirk on his face. "Oh, you...", she hissed, giving him a playful punch on the upper right arm. "You are a true knight and a real bastard, you know that?"

"Well, it's kinda in my name", Jaron answered and both of them burst into laughter. "No, no seriously", Harpy gasped as she tried to regain her breath. "It's sad that we don't have a mirror in this room, you really need to take a look at yourself. Clothes make people indeed" Before he could comment on that, she cut him off. "You know what I mean", she hissed. "You look great in that armour. Butterfly is going to piss himself when he sees you"

Jaron slightly grinned as he heard this. "You can stop flattering me now. I'm really not that impressive", he said, noticing that his cheeks got warm, probably red. "That's not entirely true and you know that", Harpy answered softly. She looked up, right in his eyes and for a moment it appeared as if she would slide closer towards him, still having one of her hands rested on his right gauntlet. The moment was gone too soon, as she burst into laughter again, taking a step away from him. "You should look at you now, Jaron", she giggled. "You are really not that impressive when you're all red like that. You should have called yourself 'Ser Jaron the Red'"

This caused both of them to chuckle, albeit Jaron had to clench his teeth in anger at the same time.

She turned away from him, much to his disappointment, walking closer towards the door. "I assume Robb is back by now. Come on, I really don't want to leave Martin alone with him for too long", she urged him. Jaron let out a frustrated groan and she let out a short laugh again. To his content, her smile seemed to be far less forced now. Still, there was one more thing he had to talk about...

"Harpy", he said, causing her to turn around immediately taking a step towards him again.

"Yes?", she asked toneless. Jaron pressed his lips together for a moment. No, not now. That would be terrible timing. "Is anything wrong?", she asked again. "Are you sure about your plan?", he asked and noticed that she let out a sigh. "I am", she stated. "I know it's risky, for you, for me, perhaps even for this drunken pig Robb. But I am willing to take that risk if it means that I never have to look at a tiny mutilated corpse again, knowing fully well that I am to blame"

Jaron noticed the tears in her eyes and put his good hand on his shoulder, pulling her into a soft hug. For a second, she rested her head on his shoulder, slightly shivering as if she was about to weep. "You are not to blame for what Butterfly does, I hope you know that", he tried to console her. She pulled away from his hug, holding him at arms length while looking him sternly in the eyes. "You have no idea what I'm to blame for", she hissed. "True, I never harm a single one of Butterfly's victims. In fact I knew most of them personally, I cared for all of them in some way. While some might see it as morally wrong what me and the Burned Man do, I also see the good in our works" She paused for a moment. "But that doesn't mean that I don't send them out on the streets every fucking day, that doesn't mean I don't put a huge target on them. I know exactly that Butterfly makes no difference between children and adults when it comes to the treatment he gives them"

Her face got a distraught, almost disgusted expression as she continued "Still, I smile at them every time they get ready to go out there. I give them a kind word and bolster them, promise them a hot meal when they return. I hug them when they leave, knowing fully well that it might be the last time I see them. And only the most intelligent of them come to the same conclusion" She turned around, away from Jaron and he saw that she was writhing, her hands shaking. "Me and the Burned Man, we are as much at fault for this situation as Butterfly. And I'm not willing to take this any longer. I have tried to convince the Burned Man to change so many times, but he is the most stubborn and determined man I've ever met. He won't stop", she mumbled and looked over her shoulder. Jaron saw that she was crying. "So he leaves it to me to stop Butterfly. And I can't do this without help. You. Martin. Even Robb"

There were many things Jaron wanted to tell her in this moment, but before he could say anything, the door to the armoury was opened again, revealing Martin standing in the doorway.

The mercenary looked surprised, from him to Harpy, his face showing a mixture of worry and amazement. "Are you crying?", he asked and Harpy shook her head. "It's nothing", she answered. "I'm fine, just... anxious"

Martin gave her an understanding nod, looking at Jaron, looking at him from head to toe. "May the gods have mercy, I believe we have a real knight among us", he said with a sly grin. "Jaron, you bastard, you look great!"

"Butterfly is going to piss himself, that's what I said", Harpy answered, wiping her tears away. Martin chuckled as he heard this. "I doubt it, but it's a nice image in my head", he said and his smile faded. "Robb arrived and he's impatient. Apparently you're having a meeting with one of Butterfly's men very soon"

Harpy let out a sigh. "Better get ready then... he caused me nightmares for the past four years. Time to face them" Holding her head high, she started to walk out of the room, Martin and Jaron following closely and in silence.

They arrived at the main hall shortly afterwards. Robb was already there, walking in a small circle, his face showing impatience. "Look who finally decided to show up. Good morning, Ser Bastard", he snarled and Jaron shot him an angry glare. "We got a meeting with Butterfly's men in half an hour. And we shouldn't be late"

Slightly less angry, he looked at Harpy. "You're sure about that?", he asked. Harpy gave him a nod and Robb let out a sigh. "If we fail, death is the best thing that can happen to you", he warned her. "I know", Harpy answered with an angry tone in her voice. "Do me a favour and shut up. I can't stand your insults today"

Robb did her the favour and stayed silent, albeit Jaron saw an irritated look on his face. Harpy did not seem to mind, as she turned around towards Martin. The mercenary opened his arms widely and she jumped at him, tightly hugging him. Jaron saw Martin's distraught facial expression as he was gently holding her.

"Stay safe", he mumbled. "Or else..." His voice cracked. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do" A sad smile flashed across his face as she leant upwards to give him a kiss on the cheek. "I will, my friend", she said and sounded as if she tried to convince herself. "Nothing bad can ever happen, as long as I got a true knight with me"

"About that...", Martin mumbled, glaring at Jaron. "I like you a lot, Jaron. But if you fail to protect her..." He was cut off by Harpy putting a hand on his upper arm. "He won't", she reassured him, looking at Jaron. He saw trust in her eyes. "He won't", she repeated.

"Touching", Robb growled. "But the men we are going to meet won't wait for us. We got one chance, so don't fuck this up" Harpy gave him a nod and for a moment her face dropped. "It's going to end today...", she mumbled. "It's finally going to end today, one way or the other"

Jaron, Harpy and Robb stepped out of the building, leaving Martin behind. Jaron looked over his shoulder, back at the mercenary, noticing the grim expression on the man's face. He felt anxious, slightly dizzy as he thought about the danger he would get himself into. But he was not afraid. Perhaps this wasn't a story that would be sung about by minstrels. But that didn't matter. He had to do the right thing here.

They walked in complete silence. Robb seemed oddly relaxed, while Harpy tried her best to hide her nervousness and failing miserably at doing so. Jaron was aware that the people on the street were looking at him and this filled him with pride. He was a knight and now he finally looked the part. Of course, his wounds still affected him slightly. His left arm felt numb and every few minutes, pain flashed through his ribs. But his pride was stronger than any pain he felt. Robb lead them through the streets of Oldtown for about half an hour. The streets soon got less elegant as they left the mansions behind that surrounded the Burned Man's house. People instinctively seemed to make room for them, no matter how crowded the streets were. More than once, Jaron saw scrawny children looking at them in bewilderment. They recognized Harpy and without a doubt, she recognized them too. Somewhere among them was Himani, Jaron knew it. The urchin was following them and a few times Jaron almost thought he could see him in the crowd.

Soon, streets turned to alleyways, mansions turned to houses and cottages. The once tidy streets were soon stained with mud and worse. Robb still lead them with a focussed gaze, Harpy followed. Jaron was walking closely behind her and on her sign he grabbed her arms, holding them tightly as if he wanted to prevent her running away.

"We're here", Robb said as he stopped in front of a run-down building. It was clearly a former tenement, but looked abandoned and ruined. Planks have been nailed in front of the basement windows, leaving no light to shine in. The plans in front of the door have been torn down to allow entrance into the building. Jaron took a deep breath. Even the air smelled stale and moldy. Robb shortly knocked on the door and it didn't take long until it was opened, only a gap. Jaron couldn't see anyone behind the door until it was opened further, revealing a tall man in black clothes. His facial features were hid behind a plain white mask, depicting a stylized cat. What would have looked good on a Braavosi mummer looked frightening on this man. He had short black hair and all Jaron could see from his face was the area around the amber, almost cat-like eyes, showing deathly pale skin that reminded Jaron of a corpse. He was armed with a curved, eastern sword that was resting in a simple leathery sheath. Robb took a respectful bow in front of this man.

"I am honoured to meet you again", he said and the man with the cat mask gave him a nod.

"This is her?", he asked with a deep, melodic voice, his amber eyes looking directly at Harpy. Jaron felt her trembling under his grip. She put on a good show, looking exhausted, distraught and like a frightened little girl. And even if he couldn't see it, he was sure that the masked man was smiling and believing every second of her charade.

"Tom, this is Ser Jaron the Bastard", Robb explained, putting emphasis on the 'bastard' part. "I told you about him" The masked man gave him a nod. "You did", he growled, his amber eyes looking back at Jaron. "I have heard a great deal about you, bastard. I am the Tom, leader of the Alley Cats"

"A brutal bastard", Harpy hissed, shivering again as he switched his attention back to her, narrowing his eyes. Jaron gave him a nod. "I have heard about you", he said, remembering what Martin had told him about these Alley Cats.

"Butterfly is going to meet us at a warehouse near the harbour. He's in a bad mood today, so we won't leave him waiting", the Tom explained, stepping out of the building. "You will follow my lead. Try to run away and we will kill you. You can keep your weapons, but draw them and you will curse the day you were born. Butterfly is not afraid of a little toothpick, but he has no sense of humour either. Have you understood everything?" Robb and Jaron quickly gave him a nod and Jaron saw movement in the shadow behind the Tom.

Out of the door stepped the tallest man Jaron had ever seen. He wore a cat mask, similar to the one that was worn by the Tom, albeit his was stained with dark red blood, highlighting his eyes of a similar colour. The visible skin of the giant was sickeningly pale, as white as snow, the same colour his hair had. His arms were almost as thick as Harpy's upper body and he had to lower his head as he stepped out of the building.

"This charming fellow is the Moggy", the Tom introduced him. "He will take the girl from now on, so that I can see your hands, Ser Jaron" He took a step closer, looking at Harpy again. "You try anything and he will break your arms like tiny twigs" With these words he looked back at the giant. "Moggy, take the girl", he ordered him and the giant complied. He grabbed Harpy around the waist, effortlessly lifting her high in the air, laying her on his shoulder. A look of sheer terror was embedded on her face as she looked at Jaron and he wasn't sure anymore if she was just acting.

The Tom seemed to be satisfied by what he saw. "Good Moggy", he complimented him with slow words as if he was talking to an animal, before he looked back at Jaron and Robb. "As I said, you can keep your weapons. But put a hand on them and you will loose both", he warned them and started to walk down the alleyway. "Now follow me. Butterfly is waiting for you" Robb and Jaron followed them, the giant Moggy walking behind them. The Tom lead them through narrow alleyways and dirty streets and soon, Jaron was completely lost. Few people

crossed their path and anyone who looked at the Tom turned around immediately. A few people even started to run away as soon as they saw him. A feeling of dread surrounded him and his freakishly huge companion and Jaron almost felt afraid now, despite trying his best to avoid it. "Why have you betrayed the Burned Man?", the Tom asked without turning around. Jaron closed his eyes for a moment. He had thought about this, had thought of a story that made sense. "Because I am a knight", he answered. "Me and your boss, we have similar goals. We want justice in this city. I had to work for the Burned Man without having a real choice. Then I met Robb and learned of his desires to defect to your group"

The Tom nodded his head in satisfaction. "I see", he snarled. "You are an idealist then. It makes sense. Half of Butterfly's Solvers are recruited from idealists. The other half are drawn to his violence like moths to lightning" He looked over his shoulder, his cat-like eyes piercing through Jaron. "He's an idealist too, in his own way. Play your cards right and he is going to like you" Jaron doubted this, but he stayed silent, trying to minimize the conversation with this man. He wondered if all of Butterfly's men were like the Alley Cats, or if they were just the worst of them. And not for the first time today, he wondered if he was about to die.

Soon, they arrived at the docks, but not at the well maintained part where rich merchants kept their ships. No, they arrived at the part where goods were stored, where the buildings were interchangeable looking warehouses, tall buildings, some of them guarded by armed men, some of them looking empty. The Tom started to walk straightly at one of these empty warehouses and Jaron took a look over his shoulder. The Moggy was walking behind him, towering him and still holding Harpy over his shoulder. It clearly wasn't comfortable for her and she looked genuinely terrified. There was no trace of Himani and Jaron had the fear that the boy had lost them, or even worse, that Butterfly's men found him spying on them.

The Tom pointed at the open door of the warehouse. "After you", he told them with a patronizing voice that caused Jaron and Robb to follow his order automatically. They entered the dark, seemingly empty warehouse. A single torch was standing in the middle of the hall, barely illuminating the area around her. "You're going to wait there", the Tom ordered them after they all entered the building. The Moggy walked up to the small circle of light, throwing Harpy to the ground like a sack of spuds. She stayed on the ground, weeping in obvious fear. Jaron wanted to do nothing more than to pull her into a hug, to tell her that everything would be alright. But he did nothing of these things. He stood next to her and Robb, even giving her a glare that was meant to be cold.

The Moggy effortlessly closed the large gate of the warehouse, blocking out the weak rays of sunlight that had found their way into the building. Darkness surrounded everything outside of the small area that was illuminated by the torch. Out of the darkness, the Tom started to talk to them.

"You think you are smart, Ser Bastard", he said with a mocking voice and his words caused Jaron to freeze in terror. "You think you can walk up here, pretending to switch sides, just so you can get an easy kill" Short, cold laughter filled the air, certainly coming from more than one throat. "What are you...", Jaron stuttered, but was cut off by the Tom's voice. "We know everything. How you planned with that little whore down there, conspired to end this war in a single strike. You should have known that your attempts were futile. You should have left the city before even thinking about trying anything here"

Harpy slowly staggered to her feet, her shocked stare mirroring Jaron's. But soon her shock switched to anger, as she looked at Robb. The mercenary looked genuinely surprised, slowly taking a few steps backwards, out of the light. A deep, hissing sound was heard and he immediately jumped back into the circle, a terrified expression on his face. "What...?", he stuttered. "I... I haven't..."

"You fucking traitor...", Harpy mumbled as tears ran down her face. "You fucking traitor!" She screamed, attempting to charge at Robb. She was cut off by a new voice, deep, compelling, threatening. "STOP IT!", the voice yelled through the darkness and Harpy stopped. She turned her head towards the direction of the voice and started to slowly walk towards Jaron.

"You are surrounded. My men are only waiting for an order", the voice said again and the sound of footsteps was heard. Harpy staggered around Jaron, slowly pushing him between her and the direction of the voice, shivering as she huddled up against him. She was slightly squeezing his ribs, but Jaron hardly noticed it. What mattered was the man who finally came into his field of view, the man who caused him to pull out his sword. The cold sound of steel filled the air for a second, giving him a moment of hope. Feeling the blade in his hand calmed him down. And then he saw the man.

He was tall, not even close to the huge size of the Moggy, but taller than Jaron, his shoulders wider, his arms thicker. He was younger than Jaron imagined, being somewhere in his forties, wearing a brown and green tunic, armed with a crude looking short sword. He had a clean-shaven, but brutal looking face, reminding Jaron of a vicious dog, with messy dark hair atop his head. His eyes were brown and dull as a rock and he was eyeing Jaron with pure hatred in his stare. With every step he took closer, Jaron felt Harpy shivering behind him, tears flowing down her face as she was sobbing in fear. The man stopped walking closer as Jaron pointed his sword towards him. "That's close enough!", the knight shouted, surprised about how weak his voice sounded.

The man gave him a cold, cruel smirk. "Trying to play the hero, you bastard?", he asked, raising his left hand. Jaron saw movement in the dark, men surrounding him and Harpy. The man took another step forwards, this time not even bothering with Jarons shaking sword. He looked at him and at Harpy, who was still panicking. His smile got wider and as he spoke, his voice was

deeper than before, more intimidating, as cold as ice, as brutal as a dragons fire. "Do you have any idea who I am?", Butterfly asked him.

"You are Butterfly...", Harpy mumbled, looking past Jaron. "You... you are Butterfly?" Her voice sounded as if she couldn't believe her eyes. "You look... you look like a common thug!" She gave Jaron a shocked stare. "I half-expected a monster, but you are just a street rat..."

Butterfly narrowed his eyes at her insult. "And you are a disappointment. I've heard about your beauty, but now that you stand here in front of me, with your eyes full of fear, I don't see it. What exactly are you, Ghiscari? Andal? I don't see the beautiful woman they promised me. I only see a filthy mongrel whore"

He looked back at Jaron. "And you... you made a terrible mistake in coming here today. I have been informed about every step of your plan", he growled, giving Robb a quick glance. The mercenary looked genuinely dumbfounded, slowly raising his hands. "But... I... I have never...", he stuttered as he looked at Harpy. "Please, you got to believe me, I am not a traitor!", he shouted towards her.

Butterfly slowly shook his head. "Pathetic", he snarled. "How you could ever put your trust in this man amazes me. Then again, you are not very clever, aren't you, bitch?" He walked another step forwards, putting a hand on Jaron's shaking blade. "You on the other hand... I admit you look more like a knight than I have imagined"

"What do you want?", Jaron asked him, suppressing the urge to stab him now. No, he couldn't provoke a fight now, not without Martin's backup. If he would ever arrive. Butterfly gave him a wide, brutal smile. "Clever bastard", he complimented him, like the Tom had complimented the Moggy earlier. "You plotted to kill me. It was a weak plan and doomed to fail the moment you trusted Robb. But that does not change the fact that you brought me a generous gift" His smile turned slightly lecherous as he looked at Harpy. "A truly generous gift. I have to thank you for that"

Jaron pressed his lips together, as the urge to kill this man grew stronger. He knew, his chances of survival got slimmer with every passing second. But even worse, his vivid imagination filled his minds with images of what Butterfly would do to Harpy.

"Hearing only her side of the story, you must think of me as some kind of monster", Butterfly told him. "And to be honest, from her point of view most of the things she told you are true. But I think it should be clear that she is little more than a stupid child" He softly pushed the tip of Jaron's blade down. "An ignorant whore who could never see the truth, who could never see what I'd try to achieve"

His eyes reminded Jaron of a hungry wolf as he looked back at him. "But you... you are not a stupid child, am I right? You are smarter than that. Perhaps you can see what I try to achieve"

here", he growled. Jaron narrowed his eyes, still refusing to allow his fear to control him. He had promised her, had promised Martin, had promised himself to keep her safe.

"And what are you trying to achieve?", he asked. Butterfly's grin caused him to shiver "This city is sick", he answered. "Infested with rats who feast on the good citizens of Oldtown. Rats like that little cunt behind you. You can't fight a sickness like that without making some sacrifices" "Sacrifices!", Harpy shouted, almost jumped up. "You rape and you torture and you kill! This is not a sacrifice! This is just you fulfilling your sick pleasures!" Her voice trembled with rage. "How can you dare justifying what you've done?" She put a hand on Jaron's healthy arm. "Kill him!", she shouted. "Kill him!"

Butterfly yawned playfully. "Your tongue will be the first thing I'll take from you. Would make you a lot better", he chuckled, before looking back at Jaron. "Attack me now and I will show you why this was the biggest mistake in all of your life. Try it and I will give you the same treatment I am going to give that slut behind you"

"Tell me what do you want?", Jaron shouted at him, finally feeling his fear getting hold of him. "You could kill or capture us easily, but you prefer to talk. Why?" Butterfly raised an eyebrow. "Ah, now you're asking a good question. You see, I wasn't that interested in you when you entered the city. Another nuisance, but this time a knightly nuisance, working for the cripple. But when three of my men got killed, I admit I got a little curious"

He opened his arms widely. "And now I want to talk. Just you and me. I don't want us to be enemies. Imagine how much good you could do, fighting against the sickness in this city, together with me", he explained. "You expect me to believe you?", Jaron growled, feeling a thumping pain in his ribs, a reminder of the last time Butterfly got interested in him. "Your men tried to kill me not long ago!"

Butterfly gave him an almost apologetic grin. "True", he answered. "I don't deny it, I wanted to see you dead. But that has changed. Now I'd like to recruit you, rather than killing you" Jaron shook his head. "You expect me to believe you?" Butterfly shrugged. "It doesn't matter if you believe me or not. I expect you to listen and I expect you to think about it. Working with me has benefits, benefits the Burned Man could never give you"

With these words, Butterfly took a look over Jaron's shoulder. "Of course I don't expect you to work for free. Whatever you want, I will give it to you. Money. Fame. Or perhaps you want that girl you're so desperately trying to protect right now"

Butterfly took another step closer, putting a hand on Jaron's left shoulder, applying uncomfortable weight on his wounded arm. "You can have her", he whispered in his ear. "As long as you want. Of course, I'll take her first, but if you want you can have her before I really start with her"

He paused for a moment, putting his hand away from Jaron's shoulder before he took a step backwards, just out of reach of Jaron's sword. "And most importantly, you'll stay alive. I could kill you right now and while I doubt that you would go down without a fight, my men will defeat you. You are wounded and alone. That bitch behind you isn't worth shit and you know better than to put your trust in Robb, right?"

The mercenary was staying silent, his head hanging low, a shocked expression on his face as he was standing at the edge of the illuminated circle. The mentioning of his name caused him to look up to Butterfly, before he looked back at Jaron, slightly shaking his head, his eyes wide opened in fear.

"Of course, I expect a tiny bit of trust first. Put down your sword and step aside, so that I may deal with the whore behind you", Butterfly snarled with a grin. "Ask anyone in this city. Provoking me is a bad idea. Lower your sword now or I will order my men to attack you. Lower your sword and I will spare you, trust me"

A drop of sweat ran down Jaron's face and Harpy behind him was tightly holding to his shoulders. "Don't do it", she pleaded him. "Kill him. Don't do what he wants from you. Don't become his pawn, please!" The tone of her voice made Jaron wonder how much of her fear was acted and if she truly believed that he would do such a thing.

Of course, he could attack Butterfly now. The crimelord hadn't drawn his sword yet. A quick strike and it would be over. Or he could try to continue the talk, try to gain a bit more time for Martin, albeit this would risk him losing any advantage if Butterfly would decide to attack him first. The mercenary was out there, gathering good fighters to take Butterfly down. He would come, he had to come! He wouldn't fail him, right?

And then another, darker thought crossed through Jaron's mind. Perhaps Martin wouldn't come. Perhaps Himani failed in following them, or worse. He was on his own. And he would die here if he would continue to stand against Butterfly. Dying here wouldn't be heroic... but was joining Butterfly truly any better?

[Try to stall him by talking]

Samantha

Samantha shot Jaylon a glare of pure hatred, while the mercenary seemed to be more annoyed than anything else. "You leave it right here", she growled, slightly moving her hatchet down, so that it barely touched his hand. She felt him shiver under the touch of the cold steel and he narrowed his eyes. "You're making a mistake, girl", he warned her. "You're making a big fucking mistake. Butterfly won't be amused"

"Good", Samantha answered, slightly raising her hatchet. "And now leave it, or you can buy yourself a new hand with it" She saw Jaylon giving Sasha an angry glare, before slightly shaking

his head. He pulled his hand away, slowly raising both arms above his head. "Fine", he mumbled. "It's your money. He's getting it back either way soon"

With these words, he took a step backwards, looking from her to Sasha. "I hope you know that both of you are done in this city. Refusing Butterfly's wishes is bad enough, but stealing from him is a completely different thing altogether. You care for a piece of advice?", he asked. Sasha shook her head. "No", she answered shortly.

Jaylon seemingly ignored her, as he continued to speak regardless. "Leave this city as soon as possible. Once I have contacted Butterfly, he's going to hunt you", he warned them and his mouth formed an ugly smile. "And as soon as he finds you, we'll meet again" With these words, Jaylon turned around, storming out of the building.

Samantha looked after him, smirking and glancing at Sasha. "Well, he was certainly pissed", she chuckled. The other woman shot her a glare. "He was", she hissed. "And I'm not too pleased either. You got me in a lot of trouble"

A short sting of regret flashed through Samantha and her smirk vanished. "Well, sorry for ruining your job chances in this city", she said as honestly as possible. "You want to leave now?" Sasha sighed, before shrugging indifferently. "Fuck Jaylon", she spat. "I never wanted to work for people like him anyway. Gods, I hate this city"

Samantha sat down next to her, ignoring the cold glare the other woman gave her. "Why have you done it then?", she asked. "Coming here, I mean" Sasha pressed her lips together and even though she seemed reluctant to speak, she still started to answer. "Got into a bit of trouble in Essos and figured it would be a good thing to look for work in Westeros. But you people with your lords and kings, you disgust me. Oldtown was rumoured to be different and I have to admit, it somehow manages to be even worse"

She looked at the purse Jaylon had left. "Now, let's see for how much we're both going to die", she snarled, opening the purse and emptying it on the table. Samantha saw a decent amount of golden and silver coins and Sasha quickly started to count. "Together, these are twenty golden and five silver hands. Divided by two it's certainly not enough to die for"

Her cold glare met Samantha's. "Was that worth it?", she asked. Samantha had to close her eyes as she remembered the pictures that had embedded themselves into her mind. Her old home in the north, her father, her mother, her siblings...

She forced herself to smile and despite her experience, she felt that she somehow failed in convincing the woman in front of her. "Have you seen his face?", she asked with a stilted chuckle. "That was worth every second"

Sasha let out a sigh. "Fine, be that way, whatever", she mumbled. "I have more important things to do either way. Like, getting miles between me and this pile of horseshit" She raised from her

chair and looked at Samantha again. "No hard feeling for that Jaylon thing, he was disgusting anyway. But you should really get the hell out of here", she warned her.

Samantha gave her her brightest and most charming smile and almost had the impression that she noticed a subtle shift in Sasha's face. A friend couldn't be a bad thing in a place like this and with Sasha she was at least reasonably sure that she wasn't working for Butterfly. On top of that, Samantha knew nothing about this city, while Sasha seemed to know at least a few important people. "Wait a moment", she said, making a short handwave towards the wine. "You want me to drink that all alone? It's a bottle for two people. Come one, we drink, we talk and I make you a good offer"

Sasha raised an eyebrow. "You're going to make me an offer?", she said with sarcasm, before letting out a sigh. "But why should I refuse free wine?" She sat down next to her again, pouring wine into two glasses and handing one of it to Samantha.

Samantha raised her glass, smiling at Sasha. "To the beginning of a good friendship!", she proclaimed and Sasha rolled with her eyes. "Can we please not do this?", she asked and took a deep gulp from her glass. "So, what do you want to talk about? And I warn you, don't waste my time or else I'm gone"

"What, you consider time spent with me wasted time?", Samantha asked with a smile. Sasha sighed and attempted to stand up again, but Samantha held her back. "Just a harmless joke", she quickly explained. "Unlike you, I'm not in this city to find work. I'm here to find someone, a young girl by the name of Lunett Kawl"

"And on the way, you're going to make it your mission to piss off the most dangerous man in this city", Sasha interjected and Samantha gave her a sarcastic grin. "What I have to do with Butterfly is personal", she answered and for a moment she noticed that she failed to sound upbeat and jovial. Sasha seemed to notice her forced smirk and gave her a nod. "Understood. Back to business. I assume you want my help in finding that girl"

Samantha gave her a nod. "Indeed. You know the city, you know it's people and you know whom I shouldn't piss off. I guess without your help I'd be dead before I even get close to find that girl", she explained. Sasha narrowed her eyes as she seemed to think about what Samantha just said. "This girl... why are you looking for her?", she asked with suspicion in her voice.

Samantha quickly raised her hands. "Nothing bad, I promise", she told her. "She ran away from home and her father is worried sick for her. I'm trying to bring her back" Sasha seemed to be pleased as she heard this. "Good. That's a cause I can stand for. Tell me, what can you offer?"

"First of all, you can keep Jaylon's purse", Samantha explained and Sasha shook her head.

"That's my money either way. He offered it to me, not you", she growled. "Offer me more or look for someone else"

Samantha sighed as she heard this. She had already suspected that it wouldn't be easy to get Sasha to work with her, but she needed her help, not only to find Lunett, but also to bring her to safety afterwards. Sasha wanted to leave the city either way, but Samantha had no intentions to go until Butterfly would lie dead to her feet. No, she needed help and Sasha seemed to be her best choice at the moment.

She slowly reached to her own purse, filled with her payment for the last five months. It wasn't a very heavy purse, at least nowhere nearly as heavy as it could have been. Most of her earnings were spent on food and drinks, for herself and for her horse. Some of it was spent on a nice gilded comb which she had bought back in Pentos, but the rest was kept in her purse. As she threw it on the table, she heard a somewhat satisfying jingling noise that fit well to the expression in Sasha's blue eyes.

"You can keep all of it, *if* we find the girl, *if* we find her alive and *if* you agree to bring her out of the city for me", she explained and Sasha gave her a pleased nod. "That's a generous offer. Is that girl so important to you?", she asked.

"Family is important", Samantha answered and her voice sounded sullen, while her smile vanished. This time, she made no attempts at forcing herself to smile. And she saw something in Sasha's eyes that seemed to be similar to her own. The other woman raised her glass. "I can drink to that", she proclaimed, taking a small sip from her wine. Her eyes fell onto Samantha's necklace and reflexively Samantha put a hand on it while shooting her a glare. "The necklace is not part of the offer", she clarified with slight hostility in her voice. Sasha gave her an apologetic nod. "Never wanted to imply that", she said quickly. "I accept your offer, but if Butterfly kills us, I'm going to blame you"

Samantha's smile returned and she raised her own glass. "If he kills us, you have every right to blame me", she grinned, taking a gulp from her glass before putting it down again. Sasha seemed to frown as she heard this, but a slight smirk formed at the corners of her mouth.

"You're an odd mercenary, you know that?", the woman said, chuckling slightly. "I've heard that one before", Samantha answered with a bright smile.

"So, do you have any idea where to look for her?", Sasha asked. Samantha gave her a nod. She had thought about this during her journey to Oldtown and had thought of a few possibilities to find her. "Lunett travelled with two knights, Leonard Constantine and Lucas Flowers", she explained. "Two knight like these are bound to gain some sort of attention, trust me"

Sasha looked away, thinking about what she just heard. "Alright, Flowers and Constantine. I have a few contacts who might be able to locate them, but it won't come cheap", she explained and looked at Samantha's purse. "But I guess I can figure something out. Any other leads?"

"Constantine and Flowers are looking for a young Maester's acolyte. I don't know what he wants in this city, but finding him probably also means finding the knights", Samantha continued and

Sasha let out an annoyed sigh. "Oh great, now we're talking about the Maesters. Quite a few of them would get a heart attack even seeing me wielding a weapon. Bringing you to the Citadel would be even worse"

"Why's that?", Samantha asked curiously and Sasha flashed her a short grin. "They are a whole order full of uptight, self-righteous old men with pretty rigid morals when it comes to women. You're basically everything they are not and they hate you for it. Young, good-looking, bubbly, a fighter and female", she explained

"You think I'm good-looking?", Samantha asked with a smirk. Sasha didn't reciprocate it, instead she just shook her head. "Don't be smug about it", she growled. "Strictly business, remember" Samantha gave her a nod, but couldn't contain a smile. "I got it. Anyway, the acolyte is an apprentice of Maester Eaton of Raylansfair. Or was, since the Maester had some sort of accident"

"I've heard about Raylansfair. That means the acolyte has probably something to do with history", Sasha explained. "The Archmaester of history has a reputation of being extra grumpy, even for a Maester. Talking to him could be unpleasant"

"Sounds fun", Samantha proclaimed with a grin and Sasha shook her head again. "You got a very strange definition of fun", she murmured. "Don't take this one easy. If you want to talk to the Historian, be prepared for everything. Most likely outcome will be that he refuses to see us"

"He doesn't know what he's missing", Samantha chuckled and Sasha let out an annoyed snort.

"So, do you know a way to get into the Citadel?" To her surprise, Sasha gave her a nod.

"Indeed. There was this little acolyte. He... fancied me, to say the least. Of course I refused his advances, but I had a bit of pity with him and so we talked"

Samantha raised an eyebrow in mockery as she heard this. "Talked?", she asked with a grin. Sasha narrowed her eyes. "Talked", she insisted. "We only talked, nothing more" Samantha attempted to pat her on the back, but backed off as Sasha's glare hit her. "Come on, you can tell me", she tried to tease her, but Sasha only shook her head. "It's none of your business, but if you have to know it, I don't like the company of men in my bed"

"Now that's interesting", Samantha said with a charming grin, raising an eyebrow while taking another deep gulp from her glass. "By the way, my friends call me Sammy", she added and the other woman gave her a frown.

"Good for you, Samantha", Sasha answered dryly. "My friends call me Sasha" Samantha quickly raised her hands. "Okay, okay. I got it. Strictly business", she said, slightly winking as she said this. Sasha's irritated frown was nearly enough to make her burst into laughter.

"Turned out he only needed some advice. He had this crush on a tailor's daughter and I encouraged him to talk to her", Sasha explained. "Now, that was kind of you", Samantha exclaimed in surprise and Sasha shook her head, the hint of a smirk appearing on her face.

"Told him to bugger a grumkin. You should have seen his face", she chuckled. "But after a brutal rejection like that, he finally found enough courage to talk to that girl he was crushing on. And now they are sleeping with each other on occasion"

Samantha burst out into laughter, loud enough to cause quite a few people on the surrounding table to look at her in surprise. "And you are sure he would help us in getting an appointment with this Archmaester?" Sasha gave her a decisive nod. "Absolutely. He's too afraid of me to deny me such a simple request"

"I can understand him", Samantha said as she was slowly regaining her breath. "So, your contacts and this Archmaester. Do you know anyone else who might be able to help?" Sasha hesitated a moment too long before shaking her head. "No", she answered, albeit Samantha easily saw through her lie. "Maybe. Yes, probably, but that wouldn't be worth it", the woman added after receiving a stern glare.

"The Burned Man is the most well-connected man in this city. If he wants to find someone who is currently residing in Oldtown, he usually needs only a few hours, sometimes even less" She let out an audible sigh. "But that's not worth it. I don't trust men like him. They start off by giving you a favour and luring you in with kind words. And when you realize what you have to do for them, it's going to be too late for you to back out"

"Still, he could be a chance to find Lunett before Butterfly finds us", Samantha argued and Sasha shook her head. "Not worth it", she insisted and her eyes widened as she looked past Samantha, towards the door. "Seven bloody hells, speaking of the Stranger!", she muttered. As Samantha followed her stare, she saw that a young man had just entered the tavern. He was perhaps in her age, with a handsome, yet slightly feminine face and short brown hair. He quickly spotted Sasha and a relieved smile appeared on his face as he quickly walked closer.

"Who is this?", Samantha asked and Sasha groaned in frustration. "First you, then the insect, now the cripple. The gods must hate me", she complained. "This man is..." She was cut off when the man arrived at their table, taking an elegant bow in front of them. "Martin Wilshire", he introduced himself to Samantha. "One of the Burned Man's top associates", Sasha added with a cold tone in her voice. "What do you want?"

Martin sighed and looked around. Samantha noticed that quite a few of the mercenaries inside of this tavern looked hostile towards him. "May I...?", he asked, pointing at the chair in front of Sasha. She shook her head. "I prefer if you stand", she growled. "I'm asking you again, what do you want?"

"You're a well-connected woman, am I right?", Martin asked and Samantha knew it was a rhetorical question. Sasha still gave him an irritated nod. "Stop flattering me and start talking", she hissed.

"Well...", Martin started and quickly sat down despite the hostile glare that came from Sasha. "I need you to show me at least ten mercenaries inside of this tavern who are certainly not working for Butterfly. It is important and you will be rewarded"

Sasha raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you ask the Burned Man?", she snarled and Martin gave her an apologetic grin. "The Burned Man is preoccupied. Unfortunately I need at least ten good men right now", the man explained and Samantha got the impression that he was worried and nervous.

"And what can be so important that you are willing to pay me for this information?", Sasha asked. Martin leant forward, looking from her to Samantha. "She's not working for him", Sasha explained and Martin gave her a nod. "Good. It's about Butterfly", he explained and Samantha froze as she heard the name. Martin noticed her reaction and looked at her as he continued. "We're going to end it today, but most of our men are preoccupied. I'm left with two Ghiscari who can't stop arguing and a small army of street urchins, who I won't use for what I'm going to attempt"

"You're trying to kill Butterfly?", Samantha asked and a grim, completely honest smile appeared on her face. She breathed heavily, feeling excitement as she heard his words. Martin gave her a nod, looking at her in curiosity. "Indeed we do mylady...", he said. "Ducard. Samantha Ducard", Samantha introduced herself. "And I'm going to help you"

Sasha shot her a surprised, displeased glare, but Samantha did not care. This was the chance she hadn't even dared to hope for in the past six years. This was a dream come true. The thought of meeting Butterfly, of killing him or at least of watching him die in agony filled her with joy, with the almost childlike enthusiasm she had already though lost.

"Samantha...", Sasha warned her. "I told you that's not worth it" Instead of trying to appear kind towards her, Samantha shot Sasha an infuriated glare. "Oh, shut up", she spat. "You have no idea how much this means to me"

Instead of letting out an annoyed remark, Sasha stayed surprisingly silent, only giving her an almost understanding look. "I see...", she mumbled, shifting her attention back towards Martin. "You see the five men over there, near the counter? I know for sure that they aren't working with Butterfly"

Martin followed her stare and seemed to be less than convinced. "One of these is Ayden Blackwell. I've heard he is working for Mullendore", he said. "He was", Sasha explained. "Left his service two weeks ago. He's currently looking for an employer"

"Alright, Blackwell and his friends, your lovely companion here, me and my own men. Makes nine. I have use for ten, however", Martin pointed out, giving Sasha a suggestive look. The woman responded with an almost disgusted face. "No!", she exclaimed decisively. "I won't work for you" She looked back at Samantha. "Listen, Samantha, I'm sure you have your reasons to

fight against Butterfly. It's entirely your decision. We still have a deal for that girl you need to find..."

Too late she managed to cut herself off. Martin gave Samantha an interested look. "You're looking for someone?", he asked and Samantha gave him a reluctant nod and Sasha an angry glare. A smile appeared on Martin's face. "Listen, Samantha. If you help me, I'm going to help you. The Burned Man can find the girl you're looking for in no time", he said to Samantha's excitement. This day got better and better!

"Remember what I told you", Sasha warned her. "Not worth it" Samantha gave her another glare and Sasha raised her hands. "Fine, fine. Do whatever you think is the best. Makes my job a lot easier after all"

She looked back at Martin. "Is that all? You take Samantha here and you try to recruit Blackwell and his friends. I'm staying here, waiting for her return", she summarized and both, Martin and Samantha gave her a slightly disappointed look. The woman seemed to have a lot of experience when it came to fighting and Samantha was sure that she could be a useful ally in the fight that was about to come. However, she was relieved that she was still willing to help her in bringing Lunett to safety and also feared that pushing this matter any further could cause her to back out of their agreement.

[Leave Sasha behind and fight Butterfly without her]

Kersea

"How much more is necessary until you learn to be a good little girl?", Clayton snarled as he raised his hand once more. Kersea already felt the pain before he even attempted to hit her. Felt it in her right cheek, slightly below the bone. That was where he always hit her. It was always the same. And that was his weakness.

As his closed fist moved towards her face, she jumped up, ramming her own fist right underneath his chin, to the spot where he would never expect it. Or at least she tried it. Faster than her, faster than almost anyone she had ever seen, he raised his left hand, catching her fist and grabbing her hand with his iron grip. At the same time, he lowered his right fist, so that it didn't hit her in the face, but rather in the stomach, pressing the air out of her lungs and causing her to groan, half in surprise, half in pain.

"You think it's going to be that easy, right?", he mumbled with a sullen voice. "You think with a little bit of defiance and your iron will you could refuse to break. Perhaps you think that you can break me instead" A smirk formed at the edges of his mouth, even though he visibly tried to suppress it. That bastard enjoyed it, as always! "I think I need to give you a harder lesson", he

hissed and slowly started to twist her hand. Pain flashed through Kersea's wrist as he moved her hand upwards and tears formed in her eyes as she let out a pained whimpering.

"Clayton...", Alysanne mumbled, but the man did not stop. She saw it in his eyes, he didn't even thought about stopping in this moment. And he enjoyed it, no matter how much he tried to convince her of the difference. The pained whimpering turned into a suppressed scream. No! She wouldn't show weakness in front of him. And in front of Wolfius... She wouldn't!

"Clayton!", Alysanne yelled, taking a step forwards and grabbing him at the shoulder. "You're going to break her hand if you continue!" Clayton gave her an irritated stare, but at least for a moment he stopped twisting her hand. A regretful expression flashed across his face, as he opened his grip, causing Kersea to sink to the ground, wailing as pain flashed through her wrist. Clayton hadn't broken it, but he came close, closer than he ever did before.

"I'm sorry", he mumbled shortly and it almost sounded sincere. Perhaps he even believed himself. "Fuck you...", Kersea answered, earning herself a glare from Alysanne. "She's of no use if you break her hand, remember that", her new friend warned Clayton and Kersea understood. It wasn't their newfound friendship that caused Alysanne's help, at least Kersea suspected this. No, it was cold, logical thinking, something Clayton wasn't capable of in his current state of mind. She simply reminded him of Kersea's use... again, she didn't know what she expected. "Wait, that's it?", another voice growled. Wolfius. Still holding her hand, Kersea let out a sigh. She had almost forgotten him. "You're going to let this little bitch go like this?" Before she could even attempt to do it on her own, Clayton pulled her back to her feet. He looked her in the eyes and it seemed to be his idea of an apology. "I'm sorry, you know that. I never wanted to take it too far with you"

She gave him no answer, instead she only shot him a hateful glare. One day... on days like these, when her hate grew stronger than her fear, she knew it, one day she would kill him for what he did. To her, but most importantly to Briar. She could forgive what he did to herself, the old Kersea was never a vengeful girl. But Briar? Even the old Kersea would have killed him for what he did to her sister. One day...

"Are you serious?", Wolfius yelled. "It's her fault that our mission failed. We could have killed that little Harking bitch and her father as well! Instead..." He paused pointing at his now blind eye. Despite the pain he was obviously in, he was trembling with rage. "Fine, if you're not going to do anything against this, I have to do it myself" Clayton narrowed his eyes. "What are you going to do, Wolfius?", he asked with a dangerously calm voice

"I'm going to kill them!", Wolfius screamed and his sudden yelling caused Kersea to take a step away from him. "Harking, his fucking daughter, that blacksmith Mettel and her whore of a daughter, the guard bitch, Commander Nathamer and his whole fucking family, Harkings friends

and that Katya bitch from the tavern!", he hissed, still shivering with fury. He pointed his knife at Kersea. "And when I am done with them, I will make you pay, you and your worthless sister!"

Clayton gave her a stare that was probably supposed to be friendly and put a hand on her shoulder, pulling her into an unwanted hug. "Try it, Wolfius", he growled with barely concealed anger. "Try it and I will cut you down myself"

"Clayton", she hissed, gaining his attention for a moment. "If you ever touch me again, I'm going to cut out your other eye while you sleep" The threat was serious and he realized it immediately, letting go of her and taking a step backwards.

Wolfius didn't even seem to notice that Clayton had shifted his attention. A cruel smirk was seen on his face, paired with his pale white eye it formed one of the most terrifying facial expressions Kersea had ever seen from him. "You think I am scared of you, Ellyrio Terys. You are a coward, you have always been a coward and you will die as a coward. Get in my way and I will show you what I'm truly capable off"

"And what could this be?", Clayton chuckled with a mocking smile. "Your most remarkable skill is that you can stab someone with a knife. Do you think I am scared of you?"

"You should", Wolfius answered in a low tone that caused Kersea to shiver. These two words, they were the worst thing she had heard all day, worse than Jenna Harking's bloodcurdling screams, worse than the physical pain Clayton gave her once again. It was a statement, a promise, something that was inherently true. Only a fool would doubt it. And Clayton was no fool.

"Do you wish to leave us?", Clayton asked and it was meant to sound threatening. But next to Wolfius, who was nearly a head shorter, more lean and armed only with his rusty dagger, Clayton felt like a babbling child. She remembered, it had been the same with the old man, the one who had trained Clayton and Raenna, the only man who had shown kindness to Kersea in the last five years. She remembered, next to him Clayton had always looked less threatening, almost meek. The old man had been the most dangerous man she had ever known. And now the same applied to Wolfius.

"Do you want to stop me?", Wolfius answered, revealing his unsettling grin. The two men stared each other in the eyes and Kersea saw Clayton flinching. Of course, he looked away first. "As expected", Wolfius commented, as if he just read her thoughts. "You have no idea what I am capable of, what I *am*"

With these words, he turned around, slowly walking towards the doors of the warehouse. "If you're not trying to prepare this city for Butterfly's plans, I will, on my own. I will kill every Harking, every Mettel, every Nathamer I can find. I will kill anyone who dares to get in my way and anyone I want", he growled and turned around again. "Perhaps even you"

Clayton narrowed his eyes. "If you leave this building, you will be on your own. A single man, all alone. If you become a danger for our mission, we will stop you", he promised him and Wolfius let out a cold chuckle. "Oh, you think I will be alone?", he asked. "There is someone in this city, someone who can help me. Someone like me"

"A deranged and reckless killer?", Clayton asked, but his mockery felt weak for Kersea. Wolfius gave him a nod. "I hope that he's similar in that field too. But no, I'm talking about something else entirely" His sickening smile reappeared and it felt worse than a thousand times of Clayton's punishment.

"Sleep well tonight, *Ellyrio Terys*. Be the little coward you are, hiding behind your fake identities, your fake smiles and your fake manners. I wonder what I will find when I will tear all these fakes down. I wonder if there's going to be anything left of you", he said calmly, in an almost polite tone, nonetheless threatening. "Sleep well tonight, one last time" With these words, Wolfius turned around and left the building, leaving a shivering Kersea, a visibly disturbed Clayton and an indifferent Alysanne behind.

"He's becoming a danger...", Clayton mumbled, looking at Kersea. She shot him another glare full of hatred and he let out a sigh. As long as she knew him, no one had dared to talk to him like that. "Look, I am sorry...", he started to say, but stopped himself as he saw her facial expression. "I am not your enemy, but I have my orders"

Kersea was opening and closing her hand, trying her best to ignore the pain. "Fuck your orders and fuck you", she answered. "I will kill you if you don't keep your end of the deal. And lay hand on me one more time and you will regret it"

Clayton did not answer. She saw the hurt expression on his face and for the first time in months she felt satisfaction. "I will send a raven to Butterfly", he explained. "And I will inform him that it was Wolfius' fault that our mission failed. Only Wolfius' fault" With these words, he turned around, walking to the second floor of the warehouse, where he kept his raven, leaving Kersea and Alysanne behind.

"It's going to get easier, puppy", Alysanne said, putting a hand onto her shoulder and Kersea rolled with her eyes. "Where have you heard that line?", she asked with frustration. Alysanne didn't seem to notice her mocking tone, instead she seemed to honestly think about the question. "The old man told me, last time I saw him. Called me 'Sweet Alysanne'. Never thought anyone would call me sweet" She giggled slightly. "But he was right, you know. It got easier for me. Just swallow your pride and you'll start enjoying it"

Kersea gave her no answer. She watched the stairs that lead to the second floor. Her right hand still throbbed in pain and her left cheek burned like all the seven hells. Despite the pain, she felt different than before. One day she would make them pay, Butterfly, Wolfius and Clayton, a thousand times Clayton. One day...

No choices for this part

Marak

Marak took a last look at the recruits and then looked back at the far more pleasant sight of Nora. Fuck the recruits, they could train themselves! There was a girl right in front of him who couldn't wait to resist his famous charm! He walked towards her, ignoring the icy glare she shot him. Yeah, she played hard to get, he liked that. But he wouldn't be Marak if he would allow such a minor obstacle to stop him!

"So... Nora, isn't it?", he asked as he walked closer. She was still trying her best to ignore him, but Marak already felt her resistance dwindling. "Buffoon, isn't it?", she answered, trying to imitate his voice. That only encouraged Marak and he gave her a nod, noticing too late what exactly she had said. "No!", he exclaimed. "Marak. My name is Marak. Not buffoon"

For a moment she seemed to be genuinely baffled, but then a short laugh forced it's way out of her throat. "What do you want?", she asked with a grin. Yeah, he almost had her and he barely needed to say a word. Marak was proud at himself in this moment. He knew, his looks did their part. No woman could resist his muscles for long. Well, Noelle could, but she didn't count!

"I asked you a question, buffoon", Nora repeated herself and Marak knew she was interested, or else she wouldn't have repeated her question, right? "Oh, nothing. Just came by, seeing you and I asked myself, why is such a beautiful young woman like you forced to stand guard on a day like this?"

As she gave him a look that was probably curious, he decided to continue "Well... you know, there is someone who's... ahem... 'standing guard' from the moment he saw you. Perhaps you'd like to meet him?" Yes, yes that sounded good! Suggestive, not too direct, including a wordplay and it gave her something to think about! Marak felt proud that he had managed to compliment her beauty and her intelligence in a single sentence.

Nora raised an eyebrow and a light smile formed on her face. "Are you serious?", she asked and Marak gave her a hasty nod. "Absolutely!", he said, immediately noticing that he said something wrong as she burst into laughter.

"You must think of me as some dim-witted harlot that I fall for a line as horrible as that one", she chuckled and Marak hastily shook his head. "No! You are not dim-witted", he clarified and her laughter stopped. "Have you just called me a harlot?", she asked with a frown and Marak realized that he did a mistake.

He opened his mouth, closing it again, staring at her for a moment. "No!", he exclaimed. "No, that was not what I wanted to say!" He gave her his irresistible grin and slightly flexed his muscles. His naturally good looks should do the rest. "Albeit I'm sure that a lad as fine as you could get filthy rich in that profession"

Nora let out a sigh, as her smile returned. "I guess the priestess is the brain in your team", she remarked with a mocking tone. Marak gave her a proud nod. He was completely willing to admit that Noelle was better when it came to forming plans. Of course, he was still more intelligent, as he was not the one worshipping a pickled fish.

"Listen, Marak, I'm very entertained..", she started to say and Marak took a step closer towards her. "I knew you would be. What do you say, I can show you how entertaining I can be...", he said and she sighed. "I am very entertained, even if you have less charm than a pox-ridden piglet", she continued and Marak gave her a confused look. "Wait, what?", he asked.

"Sadly, you are hindering the captain of the guard at doing her duty. I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave the castle", Nora explained to him, the polite tone of her voice somewhat marred by the fact that she was talking very slowly, as if she was explaining these things to an imbecile.

"Wait a moment, you're throwing me out of the castle?", Marak exclaimed and for a moment he wasn't sure what was worse. The realization that his irresistible charm had failed on her, or the fact that a girl half his size was attempting to throw him out of the castle.

"Exactly", Nora answered and flashed him a genuinely stunning smile. "We can do it the easy way, or we can do it the hard way" A gleam of hope grew in Marak as he reciprocated her smile. "That's some sort of code, eh? Easy way, hard way... Oh, I know exactly what that stands for", he whispered towards her. "Not wanting to show any weakness in front of the recruits, huh? Well, as you wish, m'lady" He leant forwards and her smile got even wider. "We should do it the hard way, after you 'threw me out'", he grinned. "I know a few positions a girl from Meereen once taught me. Perhaps I can teach you"

"You want the hard way?", she asked and her smile got even wider. Yes, he had her! Marak had done it again! "Are you sure?" He gave her an excited nod, allowing himself to imagine what she would look like without that shirt. Oh yes... that alone would be worth the past weeks!

She shrugged, looking almost apologetic for a moment. "I warned you...", she chirped and moved her knee upwards with surprising speed. A sudden burst of pain flashed through Marak's crotch, as he went down on the ground, whimpering in pain. For a moment, all feelings of lust were suppressed by the deep seated wish to bash that whore's head in. But as he tried to stand up, her elbow hit him in the neck, sending him to the ground again. Not that it was necessary, given how weak his legs were after her kick.

"That was the hard way", Nora remarked dryly. "Sorry for that. I assume it hurts" Marak managed to give her a nod, despite the fact that his neck almost managed to hurt even worse than his genitals. "See it as a lesson. Here in Raylansfair we don't react kindly to harassment", Nora explained as tears of sheer agony formed in Marak's eyes. By the Drowned God, that woman had a mean kick!

"You know what? Stay here as long as you want, I think you've learned a lesson, haven't you?", she said in the upbeat tone of an overly enthusiastic commanding officer. He gave her a weak nod and she pointed towards herself. "On this courtyard, in this castle, I'm the captain of the guard. I don't intend to degrade myself by swooning over some ripped barbarian with the wits of an Ibbenese"

"Understood", Marak mumbled and groaned as he tried to move, causing the pain in his loins to intensify. "Understood what?", Nora asked, giving him a stern glare. "Understood, Ser!", Marak yelled as loud as he could in his current state. "And don't you ever forget it", Nora warned him, before she walked away, leaving him lying on the ground. He looked after her and a grin formed on his face. By the Drowned God, what a woman!

And so he lay on the ground, trying his best to ignore the pain in his loin and the humiliating words of the recruits. Damn rookie's, he could have shown them how to handle a weapon. And he could have shown Nora how to handle... A new wave of pain flashed through his crotch and he let out a pained groan. No, better not to think about it...

After a short while he was able to breath without pain, after a little longer he could even stand up. While his stance was a bit hunched, he was finally able to move again. Nora stood at the other side of the courtyard, shooting him another icy glare and Marak decided that it would be wiser to leave her alone. And he noticed someone else standing not far from him... Noelle! How long was she already standing there?

The priestess was walking towards him, a mocking smile on her lips. "Long enough", she greeted him, mustering him from head to toe. "I see you made quite a fool out of yourself again" He gave her a grudging nod and she turned around, signalling him to follow her without any additional word.

"I have talked to the acting lord", she told him as they were walking across the courtyard and out of the gate, leaving the castle behind. "A fascinating man, conflicted between guilt and duty. It's a shame he does not want to help me"

"He refused you?", Marak said in surprise and Noelle gave him a nod, her face looking slightly irritated. "He refused to listen, refused to look, refused to help in any way. I told him what I want and he told me that he does not trust me or any other follower of R'hllor. And I guess I learned a few words in your language I wasn't quite acquainted with yet"

"Smart man", Marak answered, not even bothering with not thinking aloud. She would read his thoughts anyway, after all. Noelle ignored his remark and continued. "Because of his refusal to help, things got a bit harder for us, a bit... bloodier"

"Bloodier?", Marak asked and his face lit up again. Bloodier sounded good! Noelle gave him a nod. "I don't like it, but the acting lords refusal left me with no other choice if I want my plans to

succeed. His choice just doomed several people. And that's why I have hired you", she answered. "After all, you make a living from being a killer, right?"

Marak gave her a proud nod and his mouth formed a wide grin. "Who is it, Noelle? Who needs to die?", he asked. Noelle sighed and she looked visibly reluctant to answer. "I don't have names, but I know where to find them. I saw them in the fire. A field of flowers, a butterfly in disguise, a girl who's half a dragon and..." She paused and looked at him sternly, albeit a hint of regret was seen in her eyes. "Marak, I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to be honest with me. You know you can't lie to me", she told him and Marak gave her a nod. "Tell me, Marak, do you have a problem with killing a child?"

["No"]

Willfred

"We're going in through the front. We have enough men to pull it off", Willfred decided and Jaro let out a sigh. "Are you sure with that? You really know what you're doing?", he asked. Before Willfred could answer, Tallian gave the man an annoyed nod. "Ser Willfred knows exactly what he is doing", he snarled. "And you'd do better not to question him"

Jaro and I'Lian exchanged a glance and shrugged nearly simultaneously. "Well, we can't stop you by force. But make sure that Roger knows that we tried to stop you", I'Lian explained. "If something goes wrong, it's your fault" Willfred gave him a nod. "We can deal with that", he answered quickly.

"If you say so...", I'Lian mumbled. "But don't say we didn't warn you. Roger has something planned and you might endanger him and yourself" Tallian gave him a glare and slightly shook his head as he looked back to Willfred. "We have a dozen men with us. I doubt anything inside of that tavern can become a danger to us", he answered. "Come on, Willfred. Give the order" Willfred took a deep breath, looking at the small building in front of him. The arguments Jaro and I'Lian almost caused him to reconsider his decision, but the stern look the general had on his face caused any of these thoughts to vanish. The general was still angered by Willfred's earlier decision to fight in the battle and angering him even further seemed to be unwise.

"Follow me", he ordered his men as he climbed down from his horse, drawing his sword as he reached the ground. "But stay silent. We don't want any more attention" This seemed to please Tallian, as well as Jaro and I'Lian. "If you don't mind, me and my brother would like to go through the backdoor. Perhaps some of the men Roger has been chasing could escape otherwise"

Tallian shook his head. "We do mind. You two won't go anywhere until Roger confirms that you are trustworthy", he barked at them. "If I catch you not following my orders..." Willfred cut him off by putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, general", he said. "I think we can trust them. Still, I prefer to take the enemy head on instead of sneaking around like a coward. We have an

advantage in sheer numbers and should use it. However, we can also use Jaro and I'Lian to surprise them from behind”

To Willfred's surprise, the general seemed to think about what he just said. “Good”, he growled. “If you think that this is the best course of action...” He still seemed to look unhappy about this, but Willfred's decision stood.

Jaro seemed to be relieved by this. His stern face cracked a slight smile. “We won't disappoint you”, he promised. I'Lian appeared to add something, but Jaro quickly pulled him away before he could even open his mouth, giving Willfred an apologizing stare as they started to sneak up on the inn, trying to stay out of sight from the window.

“They know how to remain unseen, I have to give them that”, Tallian mumbled, before looking back at Willfred. “I hope you are right in trusting them” Willfred gave him a short smile. “Have a little faith in me, general. They won't disappoint us”, he said. Tallian slowly shook his head. “I hope so”, he muttered.

On Willfred's signal, the soldiers started to approach the inn in a crouched position, their swords drawn. He followed shortly after them, but walked faster to be the first to arrive at the inn. His heart thumped furiously and he couldn't contain a smile of excitement. There would be a fight soon and no matter how insignificant it might be, he wouldn't sneak around like a coward. He would take whoever was in there head on.

He stopped directly to the left of the door, while Tallian sneaked up to the right side of it. Unlike Willfred, the general looked worried and not ready for a fight. Willfred wondered how good he was either way. As far as he knew, Vashord Tallian had never won a tournament and his actual fighting skill was debatable. He was in his forties, way out of his prime when it came to physical shape, heavy-weight and sweating, his dark blonde hair sticking to his head. And he was obviously not ready for a fight to the death.

Despite this, Tallian was the first to storm the room as Willfred gave him a nod. His craven nature aside, the general had always been someone who was good at following orders and Willfred appreciated this. From inside of the tavern, he heard loud surprised shouts coming from several men, as he quickly followed after Tallian.

The room was small and scarcely decorated. Many small details showed Willfred that this wasn't a very well-visited inn, that probably had to serve as an ordinary farmhouse as well in times where customers shunned it. Which probably happened quite often in these parts of the Reach. Three men, covered in dirt and blood, were standing next to a table, behind them a ladder that lead up to a hayloft. Two of them were holding small crossbows, pointing them at Tallian. The third of them was holding a small kitchen knife, pointing it at the throat of a young girl he just grabbed. The girl couldn't be older than thirteen, her brown eyes widened in fear as a drop of blood was flowing down from a small cut where the knife pointed at her flesh.

"Who the fuck are you?", the man shouted. "Don't come closer or I'll cut her throat!" Willfred quickly raised his arms in an attempt to calm him down. This did not go as planned! As much as he just wanted to attack these people head on, he never took into consideration that they might have a hostage with them. He knew, he needed to do something to defuse this situation. "Easy now", he said. "It appears we made a small mistake" The man narrowed his eyes. "You haven't answered my question!", he growled. "Are you with that archer? The one who shot some of our men?"

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about. It appears you are not the people we're looking for", Willfred quickly answered, glancing at Tallian, who seemed to be similarly unwilling to attack these men now that they had a hostage.

"Bullshit!", the man exclaimed. "One step closer and she's..." He didn't get to finish his sentence, as an arrow impaled his head from behind, right through the left eye. The force of the impact was strong enough to make him stagger forwards, causing him to drop the knife, albeit he dragged the girl to the ground with him.

One of the two crossbowmen turned around, pointing his crossbow towards the hayloft and received an arrow in the neck for this. The third man blindly shot his crossbow towards Willfred and Tallian before throwing it away and running towards the small backdoor below the hayloft. He didn't get far, as Jaro entered the room through the very same door, impaling the fleeing man with his broadsword.

Willfred took a quick look around. "That was close. Everyone okay?", he asked, before noticing that Tallian knelt on the ground. The bolt from the crossbow had grazed his shoulder and slashed the chainmail that protected it, causing a bleeding cut. Luckily, it hadn't directly hit him, but the shock in his face spoke volumes. Still, as the general looked past Willfred, his face lit up. Willfred followed his stare and saw a man climbing down from the hayloft. He was in his early thirties, had the light blonde hair that was common with people from the western Rock, paired with green eyes that gave him almost the appearance of a Lannister. A simple leather armour was covering his lean and wiry body, while a long scar was running down his gaunt face, narrowly missing his left eye. Despite the differences in build and hair colour, he had a lot in common with the man that was obviously his brother, with Darren Reyne.

Before even reacting to Willfred and his soldiers, he leant down to the young girl, who was shivering in fear. He gently grabbed her hand, pulling her up to her feet again and giving her a light hug. "It's all good, girl", he whispered to her. "It's over. Where is your father?"

She pointed outside of the window, towards the forest and his face darkened slightly. "He's out for a hunt, right?", he asked and she gave him a nod. A kind smile appeared on his face as he reached to his belt, pulling out his heavy purse and handing it to her. "I think he won't return for

a few more hours. While he's gone, could you make us the capon I have seen in your kitchen? For me and for your new guests here? Keep the rest of the money, for your inconvenience" Only as she gave him a shy nod and ran to a backroom, presumably the kitchen, the man looked at Willfred and Tallian. Despite hit pain, the general walked towards him, opening his arms to a brotherly hug. "Roger Hill, you son of a bitch!", he shouted as he was enfolding him in his arms. "How long has it been? Five years?"

"Too long, Vashord!", Roger answered, albeit his smile faded as he finally looked at Willfred.

"This is...", he mumbled, pulling away from Tallian and walking towards Willfred. "Ser Roger",

Willfred greeted him with a polite bow. "My name is..." Roger cut him off with a handwave. "I know exactly who you are, boy. You look exactly like your father" His smile returned, widely and brightly. "And if you don't give your uncle a big hug right now, I'm going to be very upset"

With these words, he pulled Willfred into a tight hug, as he patted him on the back. "Willfred Reyne", he muttered. "By the Warrior, you've grown into a formidable young man" He pulled away from him, albeit his hands were still resting on his shoulders. "Why are you here?", he asked.

Willfred let out a sigh. "It's been quite some trouble to find you, uncle", he said. "We have problems back in the Rock. Problems you might be able to help us with" He pointed towards the table the three bandits had set on just a few minutes ago. "Perhaps we should sit down. It's going to be a long talk"

No Choices for this part

Garthon

Thanks to the company of Jon the Harper, Dacey and Jared, the past hours had been quite pleasant. While Dacey still wasn't very friendly towards him, she had warmed up to George, much to the boys joy. She wasn't a very talkative girl, but had happily listened to George's tales, how he grew up without knowing his father, how he entered Lord Tully's service to support his poor mother, how he killed his first man to save Tully's life, but also happier stories, like the adventures he had with his dog when he was a young child. Once started, it was almost impossible to stop George from talking. Jon had tried it with an extra loud rendition of 'Six Maids in a Pool', but it had only silenced him for a few minutes.

Jared had proven to be better company. The man and Garthon enjoyed their fair share of silence, only occasionally breaking it by asking each other a question. Garthon learned that Jared was an exceptionally gifted archer and even witnessed his skills first hand, as he shot a running squirrel over fifty feet without any trouble. He also learned that Jared was born near Raventree Hall and that his father died eight years ago, while he was forced to fight against the armies of the Rock at the Gold Tooth. In return he had to reveal how his own father drank

himself to death while he and Torvin were younger and how both brothers had to use their individual talents to keep their family from dying.

Finally, there was the Harper. Jon was still an enigma for Garthor. He liked to sing more than he liked to talk, especially when it came to his backstory. But his manners and wording made Garthor suspect that Jon had noble heritage, perhaps either a trueborn or at least a bastard son of some Riverlord. He was polite, even friendly, but Garthor never forgot that he dealt with a true outlaw here, part of a group that was infamous for hanging every Ironborn they got hold off. His neck already felt a bit stiff as he imagined the amount of luck he had that Jon had believed him.

And now they were in Maidenpool. For Garthor it was the most beautiful city in the Riverlands, no, in all of Westeros. It was remarkably clean for a city of its size, its small streets retaining a sense of cosiness usually reserved for smaller villages. The peaceful atmosphere had almost something magical on it, a romantic vibe that caused excitement in Garthor. A few years ago, he and Torvin had been here before. The journey had mostly been Garthor's wish, as Torvin had little sense for the finer arts that were celebrated in this city. Music was a nuisance to him at best, while Garthor loved it. Torvin found no joy in paintings or in the work of mummers. Yet even he had smiled as Garthor had joined a group of them for a few hours, making a small fortune by singing 'The Dornishman's Wife' while a dwarf from the Summer Isles and a fat woman from Mantarys backed him with a flute and a lute respectively.

Of course, Maidenpool had its darker sides as well as Garthor knew just too well. The city just managed to hide them better. As one of the kingdoms only cities with access to the Bay of Crabs and the Narrow Sea, it served as a gateway to the Free Cities and the continent of Essos in general. As a result, the city was full of bright-coloured merchants from the free cities, as well as artists, painters, street musicians and mummers, their skin tone ranging from the pale white skin of the Northerners to the almost midnight black skin of the Summer Islanders. And the city was also full of the Free Cities' scum. A man who knew where to look was able to find paid killers, professional thieves and especially smugglers, oh, so many smugglers. And Garthor was a man who knew exactly where to look for them.

For a while, he took lead of the group as they rode through the city gates, past the surprisingly narrow main street. Even a modest carriage had a lot of trouble navigating in the main street, so even the nobles of Maidenpool were used to walking. Only the laziest and fattest of them insisted on being carried around in sedans, like the pentoshi magisters were known to do. They walked through the genuinely beautiful upper neighbourhoods of Maidenpool, where even the smell that was so common for a city seemed to be less horrible. They passed numerous taverns and brothels, and Garthor was almost willing to spend the night there, in the arms of a lovely self-proclaimed maiden, who would give him anything he needed as long as he had the money.

They passed an especially stubborn street merchant with a broad Norvoshi accent, who insisted on selling Dacey a brazen brooch, formed like a stylized river. George ended up buying it for her and she blushed almost as much as he did as he handed it to her. And they passed a cocky thief, who only narrowly managed to escape after Jared had caught him in the attempt of stealing his money.

It was only as they entered the shadier parts of the city that George took the lead. Of course, shadier parts sounded a bit too dark for Maidenpool, as even here Garthor found numerous ways which he would have used to entertain himself if he only had the time. He was genuinely surprised that George knew this city well enough to lead them without any trouble. The boy seemed far more determined than before now, strictly leading them through narrow alleyways, always further away from the main streets.

"The man we are looking for is named Mosso and he has rented a room in a nameless backalley somewhere around here", George informed them. "It's nearly impossible to find it without the right directions or a ton of luck" Garthor grinned at this remark. "Luckily, I always have a ton of luck", he said sarcastically and earned himself a nearly simultaneous glare from George and Dacey.

Jon patted him on the back. "We'll see how much luck you have with your mission", he answered without any sarcasm at all. "What kind of poison do you plan to buy either way?", he asked, looking at George again. For a moment, the boy seemed to be unsure how to answer. "Ma... Manticor venom if I'm not mistaken", he answered, his shy nature shining through for a moment as he seemed to be uneasy in naming the deadly poison.

The Harper nodded in the way only a true professional could nod. "Good choice", he complimented him. "In its undiluted state it can kill a man in a heartbeat. Harren Hoare will be dead if you only manage to cut him. Same goes for his sons. But it's also an expensive choice" Garthor narrowed his eyes, but before he could prevent anything, George opened his coat, revealing a large purse sewn into its inside. "Lord Tully took care of everything", he answered, not realizing that he would be in a lot of trouble now if Jon would just decide to rob them. Luckily, neither the Harper nor his companions seemed to have any intentions to do this.

"You know, it's a good thing that Tully decided to do something against the king", Jared said.

"Being an outlaw, hanging Ironborn and being a general nuisance to them is nice and all, but we're never more than that, only a nuisance. With a powerful lord on the other hand... A man like Tully could become king of the Trident if he wishes. The Riverlords would follow him"

"Lord Tully as a king?", George exclaimed in genuine surprise and Garthor believed that he never even considered this thought. George wasn't someone who thought of people based on their ability to rule. Garthor on the other hand had thought about this for a longer time. If their plan succeeds, Tully would be a likely candidate to succeed Harren Hoare. He was one of the

most powerful Riverlords, together with the lords Frey and Mallister and at least objectively he was the one best suited for the task. Which, according to the general dickishness of fate and Garthon's experience with kings in particular, meant that Tully would never get even close to becoming one, or at least not for very long. A decent king in the Riverlands would be something completely new, as far as Garthon knew.

George suddenly stopped in front of a run-down building. They were standing in a small backalley, a nameless backalley as the boy had promised. It was evening already and the sun nearly set, scarcely illuminating the street and the door George was walking towards. "We're here", he proclaimed.

"How can you be so sure?", Dacey asked, looking around. "These streets look all the same to me" George gave her a proud smile. "Lord Tully took me here once and I memorized the way, which is why he chose me to get here now"

He walked closer towards the door, slowly knocking on it. The sound of his knocking was barely audible and Garthon wasn't surprised that no one opened them at first. "George...", he said, gently pushing the boy away. "Allow me" He knocked on the door decidedly more powerful and was satisfied as he heard heavy footsteps coming from the other side.

The door was opened, revealing a stocky and incredibly hairy man with the wide face of an Ibbenese. He was almost a head shorter than Garthon, but his shoulders were broader and there was no doubt that he was far stronger. In his right hand he was holding a cleaver and even something as simple as this household item looked like a dangerous weapon in his hands. "Umm...", Garthon began. "We're looking for Gosso... Mosso! We're looking for a man named Mosso. Could you get him?", he asked. The Ibbenese spat on the ground in front of him, slowly shaking his head. "Fuck off", he growled with a strong accent, before closing the door right in front of Garthon again.

"Well, that did not went like planned", Jared remarked and got a glare from George. "What an asshole", the boy hissed. "Try it again!", he urged Garthon. "Knocking won't help", Jon clarified. "You gotta kick in this door, that'll teach him. Alternatively I could handle the situation. Mosso is not the first smuggler who refused to cooperate with us at first"

[Allow Jon to deal with the situation]

Lucas

"I'm afraid not, Ser Maron", Lucas answered. "We have decided to leave the city regardless, at least for the moment" Mullendore gave him a nod and took another sip from his glass. "May I

ask why you want to leave without having found who you came for?", he asked and slightly coughed, putting his wine back down and wiping his mouth.

"It's because of Lunett, Ser Maron. Lunett Kawl, a girl who is accompanying us. She and I, we grew close over our travels and I don't want to endanger her in this city", Lucas answered, at least partially honest. Mullendore's eyes showed understanding and he even allowed himself a light smile. "I understand", he answered. "Wise choice. No man should bring his loved ones into this city. Do you know what Butterfly would do to her, should he ever get his hands on her?"

Lucas shook his head. "Not sure if I even want to hear it", he answered truthfully. Mullendore ignored this and continued to talk, much to Lucas' displeasure, while looking him sternly in the eyes. "He's going to rape her. Multiple times. For fun and for information. If she won't answer him, he's going to mutilate her. He will start with her feet, then her eyes, then her hands, he's going to destroy her until nothing is left of the girl you love" A pained expression flashed over the old knight's face as he avoided Lucas' stare for a moment. Lucas gulped as he had to imagine these things happening to Lunett. No, he wouldn't let that happen! He would die before allowing this beast to touch her!

"You're making the right choice in leaving this city, but it won't be easy if Butterfly is looking for you. He is already suspecting that you know more about Dairon and without my help you have no chance of leaving this city", Mullendore mumbled weakly. "And can we count on your help?", Leonard asked impatiently. "Or do you expect a favour in return?" Mullendore gave him a nod. "A small one. Do it and I will help you in getting your girl out of Butterfly's range. Trust me, you do not want to keep her around here for long"

"And what do you want us to do?", Lucas asked. Mullendore's melancholic facial expression vanished as his mouth formed a light smirk. "The letter, the one that got here by accident, is addressed to his holiness, the High Septon. You will bring this letter to the Sept for me, so that I don't have to send one of my own men. In the meantime, I will put together a group of two dozen men, lead by Captain Farris, who is one of my best. Where should they meet you?"

"Blind Helmsman", Lucas answered. "A small soldier's..." Mullendore cut him off with a short laughter. "I know where the fucking Helmsman is, Ser Lucas! Have spent quite a few evenings there myself. The ale is shitty, but the people there are the best in the city, loyal like hounds and honest like Northerners. I will send Captain Farris there, but it will probably take me about five hours to get him and his men ready"

"Five hours sounds good to me", Lucas said and Leonard nodded approvingly. "Better than trying to leave this city alone, that's for sure", the other knight added. He looked towards the door, where the guardsman Ryder was still standing, holding the letter. "Can we read the letter now?", he asked. Mullendore gave him a nod and ordered Ryder to take a step closer with a handwave.

"The contents of this letter are interesting, shocking, probably highly dangerous. Out of the people in my guard, only Ryder knows of it since...", Mullendore said and paused for a moment, looking almost embarrassed. "I had to read it to Ser Maron", Ryder answered in his stead.

"You can't read?", Leonard asked in surprise. Mullendore shrugged and let out a rough and brittle laughter. "Give me a sword and I can kill. Give me a bow and I will hit a moving target from two hundred feet away. I can surgically amputate a limb and sew wounds back together, I can lead people in battle and inspire them. I was trained as a soldier, a fighter, not as a scholar. No one ever told me that reading could come in handy", he explained with a grin. "Anyway, Ryder, please hand Ser Lucas this letter" The guardsman quickly complied and Lucas took a quick glance at the sigil. Broken, obviously, but the seven-pointed star was still visible.

"You can read aloud", Mullendore urged him. "That way you can make it quicker until you and Ser Leonard are both informed about the contents of this letter" He and Ryder exchanged a quick look. "I can confirm that Ryder is not working for Butterfly", the knight said. Lucas gave him a nod and started to read the letter aloud.

"To his holiness, the High Septon", he began and his eyes widened as he continued to read.

"What is it?", Leonard snarled. "Come on, Flowers. Don't tease me" Lucas gulped audibly, looking at Leonard and then at Mullendore, before continuing.

"With sadness I have to inform your holiness that Ser Ilhan Lagoon, proud and loyal servant of House Raylan of Raylansfair, defender of the faith and true knight, no longer walks on our beautiful earth. The Stranger took him five days ago. His death wasn't an accident however, it was cold-blooded murder and the killer was none other than..."

Lucas stopped again as he breathed heavily. No, this could not be! Ser Ilhan was dead and his killer was... "Ser Harris Flowers, castellan and currently acting lord of Raylansfair", he continued, seeing how Leonard's face dropped. The other knight grabbed the letter, ripping it away from Lucas' hand, before continuing to read himself in complete silence, looking thoroughly shocked and disturbed.

"Lady Halla and Jenna Harking witnessed it", he mumbled. "Jenna confessed this to Septon Corbin and he writes that he has no reason to distrust her" A mix of anger and confusion appeared on Leonard's face and for a moment, Lucas was worried that he might tear the letter to pieces. He knew, Harris and Leonard had been friends and he knew Leonard had a lot of trust in him. The devastated look on his face gave away how this affected him.

"This can't be true", Leonard mumbled. The tone of his voice made it clear that he was only trying to convince himself. "Fuck... Fuck!", he growled. Mullendore let out a sigh and slid his cup of wine over to him. Leonard gave him a short, almost thankful look before emptying the whole cup at a draught.

“Sorry that I had to be the one breaking the bad fucking news to you”, Mullendore said with concern in his voice. Lucas pressed his lips together, avoiding to look at the man. He had expected that Harris would go far to secure his power, but that far? It proved his point that Harris wasn't trustworthy.

“Five hours”, Leonard muttered, looking at Mullendore. “Then we're going to leave this city with your help. Once we're back in Raylansfair, I'm going to behead that murderous bastard myself” The old knight shrugged. “What you do once you're out of my city isn't of my concern. But I wish you best of luck with it”, he said.

Without saying another word, Leonard raised from his chair and started to walk to the door, the letter still in his hand. Lucas could almost hear him grinding his teeth in anger. He gave Mullendore an apologizing look. “It's hard for him”, he said as Leonard just left the room. “He looked up to Ser Harris and considered him a friend. My apologies if he came off as rude. He meant no offence”

Mullendore raised both of his hands up to his shoulders, smirking at Lucas. “Ser Lucas, if I'd take offence by something that small and understandable, I wouldn't be fit to lead this city guard”, he said and despite everything that he just learned, Lucas had to chuckle. “I wish you the best of luck in your dealings with Ser Harris”, Mullendore said, raising from his chair. He reached out his hand and Lucas grabbed it, shaking it with a smile. “And I wish you best of luck in your dealings with Butterfly. Surely you have it even worse”, he answered.

“The Burned Man is a bigger problem for me, but I appreciate it”, Mullendore grinned and Lucas bowed his head in respect. “It has been an honour Ser Maron”, he said and meant every word. “Same here, Ser Lucas”, Mullendore answered and gave Ryder a nod. “Please, escort Ser Lucas out of the building. Then try to contact Captain Farris. I want this done as quick as possible”

Ryder saluted in front of his commander and gave Lucas a handwave, ordering him to follow. Lucas complied, but looked over his shoulder one last time, seeing Mullendore pouring some wine into his cup again.

They caught up to Leonard in the main hall, where the knight seemed to wait for him, walking up and down in anger. Ryder gave him an apologetic stare, before looking back at Lucas. “I assume you're going to be fine from now on. Ser Maron keeps his promises and so do I. My friend, Captain Farris Flowers, will arrive at your inn in five hours, escorting you and your girl out of this city and out of Butterfly's reach”, he reassured him.

Lucas gave him a thankful nod, but it was Leonard who answered. “Thank you”, he mumbled shortly, before a puzzled look appeared on his face. “It's Harrington, right? Ryder Harrington? I've heard your name before”

Ryder let out a sigh. "You probably know a great deal about mercenaries then. Have you ever heard about my brother, Samuel?" Leonard raised an eyebrow as he heard this. "Fang of Shadows...", he mumbled. "Samuel Harrington is your brother!"

"And working for Butterfly", Ryder remarked sullenly. "Not exactly a topic I want to talk about" Leonard gave him a nod. "Understandable. But why does the brother of an elite mercenary even need to work as a lowly city guard?", he answered. Ryder shot him an angry glare. "None of your concern", he answered and it was clear that the talk was over.

The three of them left the Hightower and Ryder gave them a last look as he was quickly walking down the large square in front of it. It was already shortly after noon and the shadow of the Hightower was now falling directly onto the square, keeping it in a gloomy twilight despite the blue sky above it.

"Well...", Lucas muttered, looking at Leonard. The other knight still seemed to be absolutely devastated and Lucas noticed that his hands were shivering. "Are you okay?" The anger in Leonard's glare made him take a step back before he realized that it wasn't directed at him. "Hell no, I'm not okay", Leonard answered. "I trusted this man. He was a friend, a mentor. How can you be so calm about that?"

Lucas gulped as he thought of an answer. "I was never as close to him. I distrusted him from the moment I found the letter in his room", he answered and let out a sigh. "Still... to think that he would kill Ser Ilhan..."

"He did not deserve to die like that...", Leonard muttered. "He was a good man and yet he was murdered by a man he saw as his friend" The anger in his stare intensified as he looked towards the Starry Sept at the other end of the square. "We have to talk to the High Septon while we're here. He can help us. And once we're out of this, we're going to confront Harris. He will answer for his crimes"

"He will", Lucas confirmed as they silently continued their way across the square, towards the Starry Sept. The Sept was the biggest in Westeros as far as Lucas knew, a hulking building formed like a seven-pointed star, with seven high towers and a large spiked roof in the middle, built completely out of black marble, with huge, arched windows and a large flight of stairs that lead up to it. It was a monument to the Faith of the Seven, intimidating and depressingly dark. Lucas had always preferred a small sept, like the one in Raylansfair, over a pompous building like this.

The door of the Sept was similarly huge, consisting entirely out of blackened iron, decorated with elaborate depictions of the Seven. The gods were looking down on every mortal who entered the building and Lucas looked up to them. His gaze stuck on the hollow eye sockets of the Stranger, who was depicted as an ever grinning skeleton on the door. Somehow, Lucas had the feeling as if his empty stare would follow him.

During this hour of the day, only a few faithful had found their way into the building to pray to the Seven. Small candles were lit in each of the seven corners, the one for the Father and the Smith burning the brightest, while only the corner reserved for the Stranger was empty and dark as the night. A few septas were walking around, some of them busy with various tasks, some of them talking to the praying people.

Still visibly furious, Leonard walked up to an older Septa before Lucas could hold him back.

"Leonard", he hissed and the knight only stopped long enough to look over his shoulder. "I'm done with this rotten city, Flowers!", he answered, albeit he managed to control his voice after noticing that he was talking far too loud for the Sept.

He turned around again to face the Septa, who was now looking at him directly. She was an old woman with a wrinkled face and a hooked nose. Her grey eyes glared at Leonard, albeit her mouth formed a somewhat kind smile. Leonard pointed at himself and then at Lucas. "Ser Leonard Constantine and Ser Lucas Flowers", he introduced them. "We have a letter for the High Septon and demand to speak him"

Lucas knew immediately that Leonard did a mistake in his anger. The smile of the Septa didn't disappear, albeit every trace of kindness vanished immediately. "You demand?", she asked.

"Are you sure?"

Leonard let out a sigh. "No, of course not. Forgive my...", he started to apologize but the Septa cut him off. "The gods demand. The mortals follow their wishes", she intoned sharply. "You wish to speak to his Holiness?" Lucas gave her a nod. "We do", he answered. "My apologies. My friend is agitated as a result of recent events. He didn't mean to disrespect you"

This seemed to please the Septa, as her smile regained a little bit of kindness. "I will see what I can do. His Holiness is in a deep prayer right now, but I am sure he will find some time for you. Allow me to look for him while you wait", she answered and bowed her head before walking towards one of the stairs that lead to the crypts below the Sept.

"You demand?", he asked Leonard and the knight gave him an annoyed glare. "Listen, Flowers. I know I was a little bit too direct here. You saved the situation, good", he growled with a low voice, still looking visibly distraught. "May Harris burn in the Seven Hells...", he added and his face got a sullen expression.

And so they waited in silence. After a few minutes, Lucas started to look around for any trace of the Septa, while Leonard simply sat down on a bench, his head hanging low. Minutes passed and Lucas started to grow impatient. He slowly walked around the Sept in an attempt to find the old woman, but soon gave up as he realized that she hadn't returned from her talk with the High Septon yet. More minutes passed and Lucas looked towards the shrines of the Seven. Right now, he felt as if he could need the goodwill of the gods and so he spent the next hour walking from shrine to shrine, lighting candles for each of the Seven, even for the Stranger. It was only

after he finished the seventh prayer that Lucas noticed that hours must have passed. By the Seven, they had to hurry!

As if she had watched him praying, the old Septa walked up from the stairs that lead down to the crypts. Leonard jumped up as he saw her and joined Lucas in approaching her. The old woman had a kind smile on her face again, albeit her eyes looked cold and calculating. "I see you have used your time well, Ser Lucas", she congratulated him. "Finding inner peace in your faith can be helpful whenever you feel the need to demand something"

For a moment it appeared as if Leonard would jump at the old woman in sheer anger and Lucas wasn't even sure if he would have hold him back. Luckily, the knight managed to control his anger, albeit the helpless rage in his face mirrored Lucas' own feelings. "Can we speak to his holiness now?", Lucas asked carefully. To his horror, the Septa shook her head. "His holiness is in a deep meditation. Perhaps he will have time for you, if you wait for a few more hours"

Lucas and Leonard exchanged a look and this time it was Lucas who let out some of his anger. He walked towards the Septa and simply handed her the letter. He knew, the support of the High Septon would have been important, but they had to hurry to arrive at the inn before Mullendore's guardsmen would arrive. "Not needed", he said coldly. "We will return another time"

With these words he turned around and stormed out of the building, Leonard close behind him. One look at the sky told him that at least four hours had passed since they entered the Starry Sept. The square between Sept and Hightower was crowded now, full of smallfolk, guardsmen, septons and septas, noblemen. For a moment, Lucas stopped at the bottom of the stairs that lead up to the sept. He breathed heavily and Leonard patted him on the back. "Well, there goes nothing. Now let's get the hell back to the inn", he mumbled.

Before they could resume their walk, a small figure caught Lucas attention. It was a girl, scrawny and dirty, with dark blonde hair and big blue eyes. She was clad only in rags, but the way she looked directly at Lucas immediately gave away that she was more than a simple street child. "Seven Blessings, Ser Lucas Flowers and Ser Leonard Constantine", she greeted them with a high-pitched voice. She couldn't be older than ten years! Lucas and Leonard exchanged a surprised glare as she already continued. "The Burned Man sends his regards. He wants you to leave his city"

Leonard started to grind his teeth as he heard this and Lucas leant down to talk to the child. "You are working for the Burned Man?", he asked. The girl gave him a short nod. "Then tell him we want to leave this city too. He does not need to force us"

This seemed to confuse the girl, as she cocked her eyebrows. "Why would he want to force you? He is well aware that you plan to leave this city and it pleases him. He wants you gone, because Butterfly has a strong interest in you"

"Yeah, we already know that", Leonard answered impatiently. "Listen, if there's nothing else, we have a meeting with a group of guardsmen..." "At the Blind Helmsman Inn, we know", the girl finished his sentence, causing Lucas to open his mouth in surprise. "You... you know?", he stuttered and the girl gave him a nod. "And Butterfly knows it too", she revealed to Lucas horror. "I was sent to inform you that Samuel Harrington, the Fang of Shadows, was seen approaching the inn not long ago. The Burned Man wishes to inform you of this and hopes that you manage to save your friends in time", she added and took a polite bow. "You better hurry", she warned them and disappeared in the crowd again, leaving a shocked Lucas and Leonard behind. For a moment, Lucas contemplated about what he just heard. And then he started to run to the inn, only to be hold back by Leonard. "What do you think you're doing, Flowers?", he growled. "You want to storm the inn all on your own?" "And what are you doing?", Lucas demanded to know. "We have to hurry, we have to get to Lunett and Dairon before Butterfly's men reach them!" Leonard gave him a nod, but at the same time he looked towards the Hightower. "We are two men, we have no armour, just our swords. We are no match for Butterfly's men. I want to save them as much as you do, but we can't do it alone. We need help" "Mullendore's help?", Lucas asked. "Are you serious?" Leonard gave him a reluctant nod. "Listen, I don't think we have much of a choice here. Perhaps we'll find a way to get his help without giving Dairon away. But we can't help them all alone!", the knight urged him.

[Seek help from Mullendore]

Alys

She somehow doubted that Edward ever heard of House Boleyn before. Alisa on the other hand... But Alys didn't want to lie to them now. They helped her, they likely saved her life and she owed them at least a bit of honesty. "It's Alys", she introduced herself to a smiling Edward. "Alys Boleyn" The mention of her last name caused Alisa to frown and she took a step forwards, putting her right hand on Edward's shoulder. "Edward", she mumbled. "That girl is a noblewoman" Edward raised an eyebrow as he slightly looked over his shoulder and to Alisa. "What are you talking about?", he snarled. "She is the daughter of Lord Barroth Boleyn, one of my father's bannermen", Alisa answered "Never heard of House Boleyn before", Edward said and looked back at Alys. "Not that it changes anything" He softly put an arm around her and under his cloak Alys started to feel warm again. "Do you want to tell me what you are doing here, mylady? If I interpret Alisa's comment correctly, you should be in the North right now, somewhere near Karhold, right?" Alys gave him a nod. "'Should' being the right word here", she remarked. "I *should* be married by now, to Dante Karstark to be precise" Yeah, Dante Karstark. She had never met him of course,

but the way her father had hyped him immediately filled her with disgust. According to her father, Dante had a brilliant mind and a healthy sense of humour, which she knew meant that he likely had neither of it.

The mentioning of her cousin caused Alisa to smile in surprise. "Dante?", she asked. "But last time I saw him he was a young..." Her face dropped as she realized what she wanted to say. "Oh... of course. Eleven years sure fly fast", she mumbled.

"So you ran away from home?", Edward deduced and Alys gave him a nod. "A month ago. Packed a few belongings, left in the middle of the night. I won't be sold off to some prick just because my father wants to secure his social standing", she hissed. This caused Edward to give her a proud smile. "Admirable attitude. But where do you want to go?", he asked.

"Anywhere but here", Alys answered faithfully. "For me, the rain is still the best part about the riverlands. And I hate rain. I can't imagine a kingdom that is more fucked up than this one. It's filled with brutal psychopaths and oppressed smallfolk and I was hunted. *Hunted!*", she answered and already felt a lot better now that she found someone to talk to.

Edward chuckled as he heard this. "But now you're safe, Lady Alys. No one will dare to hunt you while you are under my protection", he answered. This caused Alys to do a calculating look from him, to Alisa and to the third man. What was his name? Carver? Carvin? Carvin, yes! Edward had a long and elegant sword. Rapier, they called it. It was more common in the Free Cities and was of little use against an armed knight. He wore no visible armour and no helmet. Alisa and Carvin at least wore a mixture of chainmail and leather and Carvin even wore a helmet. Alisa's short brown hair flew freely in the wind and rain, while Carvin's dark brown hair was barely visible under his open helmet. She was armed with two short swords that rested in leathery sheets, while he casually held a loaded crossbow in his hands.

"You can protect me?", Alys chirped. "I don't mean to sound rude, but you aren't exactly well-equipped and there are only three of you" For a short moment, Edward's smile vanished, but it returned as quickly as it was gone. "Your concern is unnecessary, mylady. Not only are Carvin and Alisa trained mercenaries, I am also reasonably certain that no one will dare to attack me. I am an ambassador of some sorts, sent by Aeron Blacksails, King of the Stepstones and the Narrow Sea"

"A pirate!", Alys exclaimed. "You are a pirate!" By the old gods and the new, she just gave her real name to a pirate! What if he would take her hostage, to press ransom money from her father? Oh gods no...

Edward let out a rough laughter. "An ugly word for such a sweet lady. I am merely someone who redistributes wealth, a freebooter, a lord of the waves", he explained and gave her a slight smile.

"And yes, pirate is the right term. However, I would describe myself simply as a very ambitious man"

"And what are you doing here?", Alys asked with suspicion in her voice. She wanted to trust him, she really wanted it, but she was wary. A pirate, seven heavens, she had never met a pirate before! Before Edward could answer, Carvin cut him off. The voice of the mercenary was as gruff as his stare. "Cut the introductions short, Anturion. Someone is coming", he growled. With these words he pointed his crossbow towards the forest Alys just left.

"Put down the crossbow, man", a deep voice ordered him. "You're pointing it at a Prince of the Isles and Rivers" With these words, the person she wanted to see the least stepped out of the forest. It was the pack leader and his pack of vicious dogs followed close behind. And now she was able to see him more clearly. He was tall, muscular, but plain looking, with a repulsive smile on his face. The colour of his hair was black, but the colour of his eyes was blacker, as black as a nightmare. Behind him, two members of his pack stepped out of the forest. One of them was the huge man with the massive beard, the one who showed her mercy. The other one was the smallest of the pack, the one who looked the softest. One of them was missing...

"Good evening", Edward said with a polite bow. "May I ask your name?" Packleader gave him a nod, while taking a step closer. He stopped as Carvin continued to point the crossbow at him.

"Harlan Hoare, secondborn son of Harren Hoare", he introduced himself. "The men behind me are Torvin Breaker and Gabin Strad" His polite smile vanished and a violent streak appeared in his eyes. "And if you continue to point that thing at me, I'm going to take all of your fingers", he threatened Carvin.

Carvin gave Anturion a short look, but kept his crossbow raised, much to Harlan's visible displeasure. "Prince Harlan, it is an honour. My name is Edward Anturion. I have a meeting with your father", Edward introduced himself, but stopped as Harlan yawned. "I don't care who you are, Cunturion. You have something that belongs to me" With these words he looked at Alys and his terrifying smile returned.

To her relief, Edward shook his head. "You can't own a person, my prince, at least not in Westeros. Besides, this isn't just any person, this is Alys of House Boleyn, a noble lady who deserves to be treated with respect. She is part of my group and under my protection"

"Who of House Whatthefuck?", Harlan remarked and spat on the ground. "Listen, I really don't care what you say. It's been a long fucking day and I'm not in a good mood. I'm wet to the bone and horny like a herd of goats. I got an archer with me, like you. I can see your archer, you can't see mine. You are at a disadvantage, so I'm giving you one last fucking chance to put that crossbow down and hand me the girl. For what I care, you can suck my fathers cock afterwards"

"To your left, ten feet into the forest. He has a clear shot on Alisa and me, but he can't aim at Anturion", Carvin mumbled calmly and Harlan shifted his attention at him. "What? The fuck are you talking about?", he asked and Carvin gave him a slightly triumphant glare. "Your archer. Not

as invisible as you think, *princeling*", he answered, aiming his crossbow at the point where he just spotted the fourth man in Harlan's pack.

The prince's smile vanished as he and Edward exchanged a short look. "So...?", he asked.

"What are you...?" He was interrupted by one of his men, the one he introduced as Gabin, who grabbed him at the shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Harlan's eyes widened. "He?", he mumbled. "Here? Now? But... I..." He stopped and looked at Edward, slightly lowering his head like a dog who just accepted defeat.

"I see clearer now, Ser Edward. Forgive me, a lack of sleep has clouded my judgement", he said, looking over his shoulder. "Hjalgar! You can come out now", he shouted and not long afterwards a tall, but somewhat lanky and surprisingly young man stepped out. He held a bow in his hands, but looked more like a hunter than a soldier.

"This is Hjalgar Holgarson, one of the best archers I've ever seen", Harlan complimented him and the young man's face lit up. "Eh, no need to get all dorky about it, Hjalgar. Stay with the frown, suits you better", Harlan added and chuckled as the man's grin indeed vanished.

He took a step closer and this time, Carvin did not stop him. To Alys' horror, Harlan walked right in front of her, mustering her from head to toe. "You got lucky, Lady Alys. Anturion is a powerful protector and you do well to stay close to him. Harrenhal is full of dark places and we don't want something to happen, right?"

"Harrenhal?", Alys exclaimed, looking back at Edward. "My goal was to reach Dorne. Or one of the Free Cities perhaps. I never wanted to go to Harrenhal", she protested. Edward gave her an apologizing smile. "I'm afraid you are under my protection now, mylady. You will reach Dorne, sooner or later, I promise you that. But for now it's safer if you stay with me"

Alys took a look into Harlan Hoare's eyes and shivered, even though she started to get warm under Edward's cloak. She didn't even need to think about it. It was not a choice. This was about survival for her. She gave Edward a nod. "Lead the way then", she answered and Harlan seemed to be immensely pleased by this. "To Harrenhal, mylords", he exclaimed and looked past Alys into the distance and as she followed his stare, she saw the faint silhouette of the hulking castle in the distance, its five towers pointing at the sky like claws. "I can't wait to introduce you to my family", Harlan chuckled and his black eyes pierced through Alys. "I'm sure they are going to love you"

No choices for this part

Richard

"So... Jarow...", Philip said slowly and his facial expression gave away how displeased he was that the self-proclaimed Lord of the Bridges had decided to sit down right next to him. Of course, he had agreed to help. Jarow wasn't a man who would refuse an honest plea for help. Still, the

presence of the shabby, reeking man wasn't exactly a pleasant experience and Richard did not envy Philip for his position on the table.

"It's Lord Jarow for you, peasant", Jarow said in a cheerful tone and Philip gave him a reluctant nod. "Lord Jarow, of course. I... I beg your forgiveness... *m'lord*", he said as deadpan as possible and with a dry tone that caused Rosalie to grin. For a short moment, Richard even saw something in Jenna's eyes that made him hope that she would flash a smile. "Forgiveness granted, peasant. I am always glad to help the smallfolk of Raylansfair", Jarow proclaimed. "Especially when we're up against the men who attacked good Richard here"

His attention shifted towards Richard, whose wounded leg started to thump uncomfortably. "You asked for help, here I am", Jarow said with a grin. Alan raised his mug of ale and managed to focus his drunken stare on Jarow long enough. "Yippee", he said sarcastically and took a deep gulp from his mug... no, Richard's mug. Under Richard's angry stare, Alan put the mug down again, giving him an apologizing smile.

"What is it, Rosie?", Lyria asked concerned and Richard noticed that Rosalie's grin had vanished. Instead she looked towards a remote corner of the inn with a frown on her face.

"Some creep is watching me", she hissed and Richard followed her stare. In the corner sat a man, small and lean, wearing a hugely oversized hat that was completely obscuring his facial features in the shadow. "Are you sure? I can't even see his eyes", Lyria asked and Rosalie shrugged. "Don't know... but I got the feeling" She looked away from the corner with disgust.

"Eh, whatever. But if that creep tries a move on me, I'll slap him" Lyria gave her daughter a slight smile, before shifting her attention back to the group.

"So, do we have a plan?", she asked impatiently and Alan gave her a leering grin. "Don't look at me, my dear. I'm just here to drink after a long and hard day which I miraculously survived, not to make plans about capturing serial killers and trained murderers with godsdamn crossbows", he answered, but was silenced as Richard put a hand on his shoulder, putting him into a strong grip. "You got anything useful to say, Alan?", he asked and his brother gave him a nod. "One thing", he said. "You're all crazy to go up against these people" He pointed from Richard, to Urid, to Philip. "You. And you. And you" He pointed at Jarow and paused for a moment. "And you in particular!" He already slurred his speech and it was visibly hard for him to focus.

"So, my brother has nothing important to say", Richard summarized. "But that does not mean that Lyria didn't make a good point. We need a plan, a good one, if we want to have any chance of defeating Wolfius"

"Perhaps I got one", Urid said, slightly smirking as the others put their attention towards him.

"We have an experienced fighter with us now", he said and Jarow gave him a pleased nod. "In single combat he would slay Wolfius and quite likely all of the other guys who attacked you"

"True", Jarow confirmed. "No wolf can defeat the lord of the bridges" Philip rolled his eyes, but stayed silent, while Urid continued to talk. "We attack them head on, with help from the city guard. We know where they are, we have an advantage in numbers. And then we kill them all", he explained. Philip let out a small chuckle and Urid shot him a glare. "You got a problem with my plan, Philip?", he hissed.

"Well, aside from the fact that it's suicidal, yeah, I got a problem with it", Philip answered. "If we attack them head on, what stops them from slipping away through some back door? Who guarantees us that they don't have a plan when it comes to that? You know, like, setting the whole warehouse on fire and trapping us while they slip away. I know I'd do that in their situation"

"Do you have a better plan?", Urid snarled and Philip gave him a nod. "I do", he answered. "The main problem is Wolfius. The others, well, they are of no concern to us as long as they don't target us. Leave them for the city watch. But Wolfius is the one who preys on our families and loved ones and from what you told me, he's the one who kills for fun. We need to kill him directly and we have to make sure that he won't get away"

"And how do you want to do that?", Lyria asked sceptically. "Do you want to ask him politely to leave his group and meet us somewhere, so we can settle our differences?" Philip gave her a sly grin. "Something like that", he answered and Lyria gave him a frown. "I have a feeling I won't like this", the blacksmith mumbled.

"We lure him out, by placing a bait in the city, a bait he can't resist", he said and for a short moment his gaze fell on Rosalie. Lyria narrowed her eyes and nearly jumped over the table.

"No!", she spat, loud enough to cause several guests in the tavern to look at them. "We won't do that"

Rosalie quickly seemed to realize what Philip just implied and gave her mother an angry glare.

"Don't I get a saying in this, mother?", she asked. "No!", Lyria clarified. "We won't use you as a bait"

For a moment, Philip looked genuinely shocked. "Wait, using Rosalie?", he asked. "Gods damn it, Lyria I would never do that and you know it" He seemed to be genuinely insulted that Lyria would even imply such a thing and Richard knew, he was indeed upset about it.

"I never meant to imply it. But Wolfius seems to be fixated on her and we can use this obsession. We make it appear as if Rosalie would walk somewhere at night, all alone", Philip explained. "Of course she will never be there. She will be safe and sound at your home, the doors locked and with you guarding her", he quickly added as Lyria's glare hit him like a hammer. "But we will make it appear as if she would be there. I have a few ideas how we pull that off. Once Wolfius took the bait, we will swarm him from all sides, leaving him with no escape route. Jarow will attack him and try to slay him in single combat"

The lord of bridges gave him a pleased nod. "There won't be a try, Ser Philip", he proclaimed. "As soon as I get my hands on him, I'll tear him to pieces. But good plan. Picking out the most dangerous target first and eliminating it"

"Except that there is no guarantee that he will fall for your trick, Philip", Urid interjected.

"Besides, it sounds far more risky to attack him on our own than getting the help of the guards"

Before Philip could answer, Richard silenced him by raising his hands. "Okay friends", he proclaimed. "Before this gets out of hand, we should vote for the best course of action. We have two plans and both of them have their advantages and disadvantages. Lyria, which plan do you support?"

"Urid's", she answered without hesitating. "If Philip's plan fails, Rosie will become even more of a target for him. I don't want her to end up like your girl!" Jenna shivered as she heard this and looked down on the table again and a regretful expression flashed over Lyria's face. "Sorry", she mumbled. "Didn't mean to... you know what I meant"

"I know", Richard answered and put an arm around Jenna. She tensed up under his touch, but quickly relaxed again, albeit the sullen look on her face remained. In this moment, Richard hoped that he could be the one to deliver the killing blow on Wolfius, he wished it more than ever. "Rosalie, which plan do you support?", he asked. Lyria gave him an agitated look. "She doesn't support any plan, Richard", she insisted and Rosalie shook her head. "No, mother, you're wrong", she said defiantly. "I support Philip's plan. This Wolfius is a danger for all of us and I won't sit around doing nothing while others risk their lives. That's not what father would have done, that's not what he would want from me and that's not how I am. I won't disappoint him by cowering in fear while others die for me"

Richard gave her an impressed nod. He hadn't expected that much compassion from Rosalie, but knowing both of her parents it didn't come as a huge surprise. He looked at Jenna, who avoided his stare. "I'd rather not vote, father", she mumbled. "I can't help you with Wolfius. I'm not strong or smart or good with a sword" For a moment, Richard expected tears from her, but the fierce look in her eyes surprised him. "But I can do my part. I will get Lord Harris to help us. He wants my help with something and I will bring him to help us in return"

Richard smiled proudly at his daughter and for a short moment she reciprocated the smile.

"That's settled then. Alan?", he asked. His brother grinned at him. "Urid", he answered. "I know you're going to drag me into this either way and Urid's plan sounds like less work for me. Let the city guard handle all the nutjobs with their crossbows, I'll stay safe behind their lines and watching the spectacle"

"Good...", Richard growled, not reacting any further to his brother. He looked at Philip and Urid.

"I guess your opinion on the matter is clear. Which leaves us with Jarow", he said and the older

man slammed his fist on the table. "Indeed!", he exclaimed. "I will support Ser Philip's plan. Slaying the dreaded murderer in single combat is a feat worthy for the Lord of the Bridges" Philip forced himself to smile as he heard this. "Great, Lord Jarow. Wonderful", he said and there was no doubt that Jarow didn't notice the mockery. "Your support means a lot . But that also means we have a tie. Lyria and Alan for Urid's plan, Rosalie and Jarow for mine" He looked at Richard. "Which leaves you to decide, my friend. Whom are you going to support here?"

[Support Urid's plan]

Drent

"You're wrong", Drent answered and Garen narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean? You're honestly trying to tell me it wasn't Durrandon's fault?", the mercenary answered, letting out a sigh. Drent gave him a nod. "Well, perhaps he overreacted, but the ambassador had to know better. Argilac Durrandon is pretty much a force of nature when it comes to his daughter. When a ship runs aground because it hit a reef, you don't blame the reef, right? You blame the helmsman", he answered.

"I don't think you can apply that metaphora to that case", Garen snarled. "Drentie, that guy lost his hands just because he delivered a message. Sure, he should have know better, but so should Argilac. Insulting the Storm Princess in the presence of her father is a suicidal move, everyone knows it and I agree with you. But is insulting a man who rides a literal dragon any wiser?"

"What do you expect me to say, Garen?", Drent asked impatiently. "You expect me to question my king? Argilac has always been a good king to his people, a strong leader. I won't question him, because it's not my place to question him"

"Good little soldier...", Garen mumbled. "You've heard about that mission he wants to send us?" Drent gave him a nod. "You, me, Montclair", he answered and Garen chuckled. "You forgot about Lady Tarel, Ser Emphryus and about fifty other men"

"Fifty!", Drent exclaimed. "What does he need fifty men for?" Garen shrugged. "Tarel has dropped a few hints", he explained and Drent raised an eyebrow. "The lady talks to you?", he asked in surprise and Garen shook his head. "Briefly. Anyway, it seems our king has inherited", he answered.

"And what has he inherited?", Drent asked, slightly annoyed that he had to worm this information out of Garen. The mercenary shrugged again. "Didn't understand the details. Some small coastal village in the Reach as far as I know. He'll explain, hopefully"

They entered the Great Hall and saw that it had emptied considerably. Many soldiers had finished their meal and were back on duty, only some especially nosy lords and their entourages

were still hanging around in the hopes of seeing something interesting. The ambassador was still unconscious, but Maester Raymond, himself a nearly ancient man who had already served under Argilac's father, was tending to his wounds, while a servant was assisting him. Drent was no Maester, but the amount of blood the ambassador lost made a survival unlikely. Perhaps a clean death would have been more merciful.

Argilac Durrandon was sitting on his throne with a slight slouch, his left hand holding a massive mug filled to the brink with the strong and bitter Norvoshi beverage he preferred. Considering the spreading pool of blood around the ambassador, the princess had moved her plate again, now sitting at the far end of the table, while Argilac didn't seem to mind that drops of blood were staining his clothes. Argella's triumphant smile had vanished, instead she had an aloof and regal facial expression on her face. As she saw Drent and Garen entering the hall, she shortly looked up, but avoided to look either of them in the eye.

Behind the king, Drent saw Jax Montclair and Emphryus Dresfel. The Sergeant was the first to spot him, slightly raising his hand to command him to come closer. He walked up to the king and whispered something in his ear. Argilac gave him a short nod and put his mug down, his dark blue eyes finding Drent. "Drent and Garen, right?", he growled. "Come closer, we got to talk" He raised from his chair and with a single look he ordered Argella to do the same. "Lady Tariel and Ser Baron are awaiting us in the war room", the king growled as Drent and Garen stood next to him. He put a massive hand on Drent's shoulder. "You brought these pigs to their pens, right?", he asked and Drent gave him a nod. A fatherly smile flashed over Argilac's face. "Good man", he complimented him.

"Raymond", he shouted at his Maester. The old Maester, who was already half deaf turned around and gave him a wrinkled smile. "Yes, your grace?", he asked. "You're going to patch him up, right? Is he going to be okay?"

"Well, not exactly okay, your grace. He suffers from a lack of hands", the Maester said and the mouths of Argilac and his daughter formed a grin in unison. "But yes, he will live, if the Valyrian's follow my instructions as soon as they leave the castle. A wound like this has killed stronger men before, but I've seen weaker men surviving it"

"Do your best, old friend", Argilac ordered him. "A dead ambassador makes less of an impression to the Dragonlord" Raymond gave him a short nod and turned around again, to continue his work. The Storm King in turn continued his way out of the hall, Argella at his side, while Drent, Garen, Montclair and Dresfel followed him.

The small group passed the large door at the end of the hall, walking up the large stair that lead to the inner rooms of Storm's End. Somewhere there laid the Storm King's famous war room, where he had planned every military action he took during the last thirty years, from the ill-fated invasion of the Reach, to the still ongoing pacification of the Dornish Marches. Usually, this room

was reserved for Argilac and his knights, but of course there were tales about it among the soldiers. Rumours that it was stuffed with the skulls of Argilac's foes, filled with maps that detailed Argilac's plans for all of Westeros. Therefore, Drent was negatively surprised as the room turned out to be disappointingly ordinary. A large, but simple wooden table, several comfortable looking chairs on it's left and right, a large, but plain-looking throne at the top end, a map of the Stormlands and it's surroundings, with small wooden figurines of stylized stags, flowers, snakes and krakens, depicting the armies of the Stormlands, Reach, Dorne and the Iron Islands. A small, wooden dragon stood close to the coast of Blackwater Bay, indicating the location of Dragonstone.

The room was large enough to hold a hundred people, but right now only two were present, sitting at opposite sites of the table, both of them directly next to Argilac's throne. To the right sat Ser Baron Schodek, a childhood friend of the Storm King, almost as tall as his king, with a thick grey beard and a strongly receding hairline. His dark brown eyes were mustering the King and his group and he was avoiding to look at the second person in the room. On the other side of the table sat Lady Tariel, Argilac's chief advisor for everything related to the Reach. She was one of the few women at court who were able to stand their own when compared to the looks of the Storm Princess. Her hair was dark brown, only slightly lighter than Argella's, her skin was similarly pale, but her green eyes strongly contrasted the princess' blue and worked well with her light green dress. She wasn't a real lady and there was a persistent rumour that she had been sleeping her way up to her current position, but her brilliance when it came to political schemes was unquestionable. Both of them had a fierce and famous rivalry with each other, but today they both gave their king dark looks full of worry.

"Your grace!", Tariel greeted them, standing up and walking towards him. "Tariel!", Argilac exclaimed, hugging her and enjoying the kiss on the cheek she gave him. "Always a pleasure to see you", he said with a grin. Drent noticed that Tariel looked at Garen for a moment, albeit he doubted that anyone else noticed.

"And Princess Argella!", Tariel exclaimed with joy. Drent knew there was no love between the two women, but both hid their sharp insults under soft silken words. "My dear it's wonderful to see you. And your dress is... extraordinary. The neckline is fascinating, a real eyecatcher" Argella slightly frowned, but remained composed at Tariel's remark. "Thank you, dear. Here I am, not able to give you a similar compliment. But I admire your bravery. Green certainly suits you", she chirped and Ser Baron let out a sigh.

"Alright, alright, little cats, I'm glad you enjoy the sight of each other. We certainly do. But let's not waste time with smalltalk, we have a lot to discuss, shall we?", he growled. Being Argilac's most trusted friend had it's benefits and Ser Baron was allowed to say things that would have provoked a reaction from the king if they would come from anyone else. The old knight pointed

at the chair next to him, opposite of Tarel. "Please, my princess, allow me the honour", he said. Argella didn't answer at first, but started to walk around the table, not up to Ser Baron, but up to Tarel's chair. She gave Tarel a short smirk, before sitting down on at her spot. "Thank you, Ser Baron, but I think here is a good chair for me. A princess should sit close to her father's side after all"

Tarel ignored this, but was now forced to sit next to either Ser Baron or Princess Argella. She chose the princess and sat down next to her, a bright smile on her face. Garen let out a sigh and positioned himself next to her before Jax or Ser Emphyrys were able to choose a seat. The knight chose to sit down next to Ser Baron, the two sharing a short, brotherly handshake. Drent and Jax looked at each other, shrugged and positioned themselves at opposite sides of the table, Drent sitting next to Ser Emphyrys, while Jax picked the seat next to Garen. In the meantime, Argilac Durrandon was slowly walking around the table, looking at the map as if he was lost in thoughts.

"The Marches...", he mumbled, causing Baron to look up. "Your grace?", the knight asked. "The figurine at the marches stands wrong. It should be closer to Kingsgrave", Argilac answered and looked at Baron. "Seven Hells, am I the only one who actually read Brownwell's last letter? They left the valley near Wyl to the west five days ago and are now meeting up with that orange guy near the Prince's Pass and the valley of Kingsgrave"

He pointed at the small wooden stag in the dornish marches, symbolizing the troops stationed there. "Does that look like five day marches to the west from Wyl?", Argilac growled, pushing the figurine slightly closer towards the dornish border and to the castle of Kingsgrave. Baron frowned at the king's words, but gave him an apologetic smile. "Forgive me, your grace. I haven't found the time to read Sergeant Brownwell's latest letter yet"

Argilac slightly chuckled as he heard this. "That's what you got me for, old friend", he grinned. "By the way, what do we know about that orange guy Brownwell keeps mentioning?" Baron seemed to think about his king's question for a moment and it was Tarel who answered instead. "Yoreen Flowers, known as Orange Yoreen. Bastard son of Ser Maron Mullendore of Oldtown", she intoned. "Exceptional military career. Surpassed his father in rank ten years ago. Most successful leader the Reachmen had in the dornish marches for centuries. Ironically known as 'Bad Lieutenant'"

"Why's that?", the king asked with a grin. "He stopped his men from raping dornish women. They nearly mutinied against him after this", Baron answered and Argilac's grin vanished. "I still don't see a bad lieutenant there", he growled with a dangerously low voice. "Which brings me to the question... What's with Brownwell?"

"What do you mean, your grace?", Baron asked. "Sergeant Brownwell is fine, a capable man to lead our..." Argilac interrupted him with a quick handwave. "Has he already outlawed raping in

his regiment? The thought just occurred to me, but I think it's an important question", the king growled impatiently and for a moment Drent saw that vicious look in his eyes again. Baron shook his head. "Not that I know", he answered.

"Well, then remember to write him a letter after our meeting. No more raping. My men are soldiers, not pigs. I expect them to behave. If they want a cunt they shall pay for a whore. I know I pay them good enough", Argilac ordered him. "Tell him, first time offenders loose a hand, second time offenders feel the kiss of a gelding knife" His hard stare directly met Baron's and the old knight visibly shivered as he looked his old friend in the eyes. "And tell him that I'm impressed if he finds any third-time offenders", he added.

"A bold move, your grace", Taniel complimented him. "But the men won't like it", Baron added quickly. Argilac shrugged. "Wonder if they dare to call me 'Bad King' for telling them where they can't put their dirty cocks", he said, causing a short chuckle from Emphryus and Baron. The king's gaze fell on Garen and his grin got wider. "Mercenary, you look like you want to say something!", he snarled.

Garen shook his head. "Not exactly, your grace. I am just wondering why you called me here. And Golton and Montclair as well. Surely you haven't send us here to discuss your new laws for the Dornish Marches, right?", he answered. Argilac gave him a short nod. "Indeed not, mercenary. I've called you, all of you, here today to talk about a little mission you will do for me", the Storm King answered.

He looked at Montclair. "Jax, my friend. You fought for me at Ashford, Bitterbridge and Blackhaven. Even Emphryus is impressed by your work. He trusts you and so do I", he explained and Drent saw the proud look in the sergeant's eyes. The king looked at Garen next. "And you, mercenary... I don't like men who only fight for gold, but Baron vowed for you. Someone who is good enough for my oldest friend is good enough for me as well", he said and Garen gave him a nod. "Whatever it is, your grace, I won't disappoint you", the mercenary promised.

Lastly, the Storm King looked at Drent. "And lastly, Drent Golton", he said, a smile forming under his thick beard. "Your involvement in this mission comes from a direct recommendation from Jax here. He called you his best man and that's good enough for me" His gaze fell on Argella. "And for my daughter of course"

"Your grace?", Montclair asked curiously. Argilac ignored his remark and looked at Taniel instead. "Please, explain to our guests what this meeting is about" The woman gave him a nod and looked from Montclair to Drent, while ignoring Garen. "King Argilac has inherited", she proclaimed, pulling a small sheet of paper from her pocket. "A friend of mine sent me this message with a detailed copy of House Raylan's family tree"

She unfolded the paper in front of Drent and Montclair, revealing a crudely drawn family tree and pointed at one of the names near the bottom of the sheet. "Lord Robert Raylan, last of his line. Died two weeks ago after a brief and severe illness. No children. No direct heir", Tarel explained and pointed at some of the other names. "As you can see, a common whore has a purer bloodline than Robert Raylan", she added and Argella gave her a sly smirk. "I trust your expertise, my dear", the princess chirped.

Tarel visibly suppressed a sigh before she continued. "This family tree involves a surprisingly large amount of smallfolk. They also mainly married into the noble House Bennick, which died out a hundred years ago according to my source. Lucifer Fossoway had a strong claim through his marriage to Lord Raylan's late cousin Olenna, at least until Dickon Morrigen slew him at Bitterbridge. Tytos Beesbury had an even stronger claim through his marriage to Lord Raylan's aunt, until a bowel inflammation slew him at his privy twenty years ago"

"I bet the bowel inflammation still had to fight harder than Morrigen to get it's kill", Emphrys mumbled, causing Garen and Baron to chuckle. Tarel gave him an irritated frown before she continued to explain the family tree. "Lord Hobert of Mander's Mouth has a very weak claim and he is still alive. However, there is an even stronger claim thanks to some ancient Lord Raylan about four hundred years ago", she explained, pointing at a name at the top of the family tree. "Lady Larra Raylan, born Larra Durrandon, related in a direct line to Robert Raylan. Younger sister of King Argilac's direct relative, King Loren Durrandon. She chose to marry into House Raylan out of love, nearly provoking a war between Reach and Stormlands"

"And in the end she gave me a cozy little village at the eastern coast of the Reach", Argilac concluded Tarel's explanation. "According to her friend, there is no doubt that my claim is stronger than Lord Hobert's. Lord of Raylansfair might not be the most illustrious of titles, but it's mine by right and I intend to claim it", he growled.

"According to her friend in Raylansfair, the current acting lord is going to be a problem, but nothing I couldn't solve. Lady Tarel is travelling there, together with fifty good men, including you. Her mission will be to claim Raylansfair in my name", he continued and exchanged a smirk with his daughter.

"With all due respect, but does Lady Tarel hold enough power to claim the city?", Montclair asked. "She's not a noblewoman. In fact she is..." He stopped himself before saying the word 'bastard', but Tarel narrowed her eyes regardless.

"Of course, she does not hold enough power to do this", Argella interjected with glee. "That's why she won't travel alone" It took Drent a moment to realize what the princess just implied.

"You will be accompanying us, my princess?", he asked in surprise. She flashed him a bright, deceptively innocent smile and fluttered her eyelashes. "If I may", she chirped.

"You want to send your daughter with us, your grace?", Garen asked and Argilac gave him a nod. "She will claim Raylansfair in my name. She's my blood, my heiress. One day she has to learn how to lead a negotiation. With Lady Tarel's assist she should make it"

"Fifty men to guard the princess and Lady Tarel? That's awfully few, your grace", Montclair interjected doubtfully and Argella gave him a nod. "You bring a solid point, Sergeant Montclair", she answered. "But more men could lead to trouble with the Reach. Fifty have to suffice. It's not like we attempt to talk to a monster like Harren Hoare"

"It's still more men than the whole garrison of Raylansfair even has", Tarel tried to convince a clearly sceptical Montclair. The sergeant let out a sigh. "It's risky", he pointed out and Argilac gave him a nod. "It is", he answered. "But Argella insisted and what kind of father would I be to deny my daughter this wish? What kind of king would I be to deny my heiress this opportunity?"

"If anything goes wrong, I expect from you to guard the princess with your lives", Ser Baron ordered them and Emphrys, Montclair and Drent immediately gave him a nod. "Yes, Ser!", they exclaimed at once. Garen took a moment longer, but he still did the same. "Yes, Ser", he mumbled and Baron gave him a kind smile. "Good boy", he complimented him. "I know you won't cause me any shame"

"You still don't look pleased, Sergeant Montclair", Argella noticed and gave him a reassuring smile. "Is there anything the matter?" Montclair gave her a slow nod. "It's risky, my princess. If anything goes wrong and you get hurt...", he said and paused as Argella shook her head. "Don't worry about it, Sergeant. See the positive aspects. You'll travel to another kingdom, to meet new and fascinating people, to serve your king and to protect your princess", she answered "And to make it even better, you'll get the extraordinary pleasure of enjoying my company along the way"

Garthon

He gave Jon a short nod and the Harper clapped his hands. "Okay, here's the plan. Jared, start to pick the lock. Dacey, get your bow ready. If we meet any resistance, aim for the knees. Don't want to kill anyone if it's preventable", he ordered his men. Both gave him a nod and Jared pulled a lock pick out of his pocket, starting to work on the door.

"What's that smugglers name again?", Jon asked. "Mosso", George answered quickly. "I hope we'll meet him there. Would be quite embarrassing to break into the wrong house", Garthon remarked and George narrowed his eyes. "Do you imply I made a mistake?", he asked. "Have you?", Garthon asked dryly, causing Jon to chuckle. "Please, ladies. Bad timing now. Jared, how's the lock?", he asked.

Jared looked over his shoulder, a grin on his face. "Give me a minute and we're in", he answered to Garthon's pleasure. "Dacey, you're ready?", the Harper asked. She gave him a nod without looking at him. "Always", she hissed.

As promised, a few moments later the door opened a tiny bit and Jared raised his fist in triumph. Jon gave him a silent nod and pushed the door open a bit further, just allowing Dacey to aim at anyone who might stand behind it. Garthon caught a look at the Ibbeneese bouncer, who had to look up to them, his massive arms folded, his hairy face showing displeasure.

"I said fuck off", he snarled dryly. "And you decided to break into the building" His heavy accent made it hard for Garthon to understand him, but it appeared as if Jon had no problem with it.

"We want to speak to Mosso", the Harper repeated and the bouncer revealed an ugly grin. "Is there any part of 'Fuck Off' you haven't understood?", he asked.

"Perhaps the part where I have an arrow aimed at your crotch", Dacey hissed. "Now bring us to Mosso, or else something bad happens" The Ibbeneese let out a sigh. "You're not a subtle lot, that right?" Still, he turned around, commanding the group to follow him with a handwave.

Jon entered the building first, Dacey walked after him. She had lowered her bow, but still held the arrow in a firm grip. Garthon followed, holding a hand on the hilt of his sword, while George and Jared came in last.

"Mosso is a busy man. Mosso might not want to talk to you", the bouncer said. "We let Mosso decide", Garthon answered. "We have an appointment with him, so the least we can expect is talking to him" The bouncer gave him a short nod. "True", he answered. "I'll bring you to Mosso's workroom. Keep your hands where I can see them"

"You're not really in a position to make threats", Dacey hissed and the bouncer rolled his eyes.

"And you, girl, are in a position where you want something from Mosso, so you should stay quiet and only speak when you're asked to", he growled, leading them through an empty hallway. It was surprisingly tidy for a building in this part of Maidenpool, albeit only scarcely furnished. The wooden walls and the floor started to get mouldy, but all in all he had to admit that Mosso's hideout was quite cosy.

They entered a large storage room, filled with crates of different sizes, shelves full of books, vials full with strange liquids, armour stands, exotic weapons. And a desk. Behind it sat a tall and thin man with a long face and dull grey eyes. His back was slightly crooked and he was writing something onto a sheet of paper as the group entered. He looked up, sheer displeasure on his face, albeit his mouth formed a somewhat polite smile.

"Who have you brought me here?", he asked and raised from his chair, giving them a stilted bow. "Greetings, guests. How can I help you?" Garthon wanted to answer, but Jon cut him off.

"We'd like to talk to Mosso", he answered. "Not to you"

Both, Garthon and the tall man stared at him in surprise as Jon turned to the smuggler instead.

“Mosso is an Ibbeneese name. You're posing as your own bouncer?”, he asked. The man's broad face lit up to reveal an ugly smile full of crooked teeth. “I like to find out whom I have to deal with before revealing myself”, he answered without the hint of an accent. He reached out with his massive arm and gave Jon a strong handshake. “Mosso Nath, at your service”

He pointed at the tall man. “This is my secretary, Beloro Mararis”, he introduced him. “Very good at posing as me. Not so good at keeping track of the inventory” The secretary gave him a frown and slightly shook his head. “Can I get you anything, Mosso?”, he asked. The smuggler gave him a nod. “A glass of wine”, he ordered him and walked towards the desk.

“You're not offering anything to us?”, Garthon asked with a slight smile. Mosso shook his head.

“I'm an honest businessman, at least towards my clients. A popular saying in Ib can be translated as 'Never trade with a man who offers you alcohol' and I follow this saying. A man who feels the need to make you drunk before trading with you has something to hide. The better the beverage, the more terrible his secret”, he explained. “Once traded with a smuggler from the Summer Isles who offered me Arbor Gold. I had to break three of his fingers until he confessed that he attempted to double cross me. That said, I can offer you a cup of water if you're thirsty” “I pass”, Garthon answered. “We're here to discuss a trade. My friend George here can explain the details” With these words he pushed George forwards. The boy seemed to be reluctant to speak to the stocky Ibbenese, but Garthon patted him on the back in an attempt to reassure him. “My name is George Rivers. My master has depicted the details of our trade in his correspondence with you, if I'm not mistaken”

Mosso gave him a short nod. “Indeed he has”, he answered and raised from his chair. With quick steps he walked towards one of the shelves, holding several crossbows. “You want two of these, George Rivers”, he explained, raising a laughably tiny crossbow. “Foldable, to a certain degree. Perfectly able to be hid under a cloak. Play your cards right it and it's impossible to spot”

He pointed it at a near crate, shooting a bolt into it. The bolt hit the crate with a loud thud and went in surprisingly deep, silencing any thought of Garthon to poke fun at the tiny weapon. “And if you can get close enough, it'll go through chainmail and even light steel armour just as a big crossbow would”, Mosso grinned. “Perfect for close-range assassination, but useless for anything beyond ten feet”

He narrowed his eyes as he looked from George to Jon. He held his stare on Dacey for a while longer. “You don't look like professional killers”, he remarked. “What do you want with these?” “None of your business”, George answered coldly. “We take the crossbow, but what's with the poison?” Mosso's smile vanished as he walked towards another shelf, holding plenty of vials full with different liquids. “Yes, the venom”, he said slowly. “There has been a problem”

"What are you talking about?", Jon growled and Mosso raised his hands as his secretary entered the room again. "Nothing too bad. But I have few problems with the delivery. The Manticor venom I trade with has perfect quality. Made in Mantarys, shipped from Volantis to Lys without even seeing the light of the day. From there it's shipped to a small cave at Crackclaw Point, near the Dyre Den. The lord of the Dyre Den then organizes further transport to Maidenpool for a nice bribe without arousing any suspicion", the smuggler explained and gave him an apologizing smile. "And a week ago a raven from the Dyre Den arrived. Lord Brune is dead and my venom can't be transported any further until the new Lord Brune makes a new agreement with me"

With a slight smile he raised a small vial, containing light green liquid. "But I can make you another offer. It's a bit cheaper and you'll get something just as deadly. And you can choose", he said and handed Garthon the first vial. "Careful, don't break it. You get anything on your fingers and lick on them and you're dead. That one is Basilisk venom. Not as potent as Manticor venom, but it still kills"

The smuggler pulled out a second vial, containing deep purple liquid. He grinned slightly as he handed it to Garthon. "And this one is the Strangler. My personal favourite, though you need to be a real whoreson to use it. It's a perfidious poison, that one. Makes the victim unable to breath. Decidedly more painful than the Basilisk venom"

Garthon held both vials in his hands, looking at George. "Any preferences?", he asked and George shook his head. "Honestly, I was glad I didn't have to choose", the boy answered. "I hate using poison, but I don't have a saying in this. I leave this up to you"

With these words he looked at Jon. "Though perhaps our Harper can give you a tip which one is better", he said and Jon gave him a nod. "Both of them are deadly, that should be the most important thing", Jon explained. "Though Mosso is right. The Strangler is the more painful one, a bit slower. Depends on whether or not you want to give your target a painful death. He won't survive either of them. It's up to you to decide"

[Choose the Strangler]

Jaron

Jaron couldn't lower his sword. He couldn't do this to Harpy and he couldn't trust Butterfly. No, he couldn't give up now. But simply attacking him would be suicide. His only chance would be to continue their talk. His only chance would be to give Martin more time.

"So what, bastard?", Butterfly growled. "I'm waiting. Lower your sword" Jaron ignored this remark and forced himself to look Butterfly in the eye. The crimelord had a cruel smirk on his

face and his stare was one of the worst things Jaron ever saw. "What are you going to do to her?", Jaron asked in an attempt to get more time.

Butterfly raised an eyebrow. "You want to hear the details?", he asked in surprise. "That is unexpected. Are you sure you want to burden yourself with this knowledge? I mean, that must be hard enough for you as it is"

"Jaron?", Harpy whispered behind him and the scared sound in her voice nearly broke his heart. But he had to continue, for her sake, for his sake. "Every detail. You're right it's hard for me, but if I'm going to sell her out, I want to know exactly what you're going to do to her", he answered and Harpy's hand on his shoulder clenched. "Jaron?", she asked again, slightly louder. He ignored her.

"Oh, I'll mostly improvise. I'm obviously going to remove a few parts. Some of them for the better, like that annoying tongue. It's going to be sad for her eyes, but I'm sure all will be well in the end", Butterfly answered with a sickening laugh. "For me at least. For her? Probably not so much. We're making an example of her, but we're not going to kill her. I'm going to have fun with her, Tom is going to have fun with her, Moggy is going to have fun with her, but we're not going to kill her. That honour will go to the Burned Man, when we send what's left of her back to him" "Kill him, please", Harpy whispered. "Kill him, I can't stand another word from him!" Her voice raised in anger and obvious panic, while Butterfly's grin widened. "Not so calm now, right?", he snarled. "You made a grievous mistake, you little cunt" He looked at Jaron again and his grin vanished. "Never trust a bastard. They are rotten beasts, with treachery in their blood", he whispered and a patronizing smile appeared on his face.

"But you're not that bad of course, Ser Bastard!", he shouted and attempted to take a step towards Jaron. He stopped as the latter's blade moved towards his throat. For a moment, Butterfly's eyes widened, but there was no fear in them. Just something that had to be madness. Jaron hoped it would be madness, for he couldn't bare the thought of a sane man doing all of this. "Or perhaps I was wrong", the crimelord whispered. "Perhaps you want to die alongside her. Together in dead, the stuff that tragedies are made of"

He slowly turned around and it would have been easy for Jaron to end it. Just a single step and he would have been able to thrust his blade into Butterfly's back. But he remained frozen, looking towards the edge of the illuminated circle, trying to count how many men they were up against. There was Butterfly and somewhere behind him the Tom, his white mask barely visible. The massive body of the Moggy stood silently between them and the door. And occasionally there was movement. He heard it more than he saw it, but there had to be around a dozen men with them in this warehouse. And Robb, who's allegiance was questionable at best.

"She infected your mind already, am I right?", Butterfly asked. "The sickness inside of her, inside of this city, it already affected you enough to give you an opinion on me without even meeting

me” Jaron clenched the fist of his wounded arm as he heard this, sending a light shiver of pain through his lower arm. “Perhaps it had something to do with your men trying to kill me!”, he growled.

Butterfly turned around again, his eyes clearly thirsty of blood. “They would still like to do it. Many of them knew the men who died on that day and they would love to make you pay. The only thing that stops them is me and my courtesy”, he snarled. “So, next time I give you an order you better follow it or I’ll stop being polite. And now *lower your sword!*”

Jaron’s sword remained where it was, raised and pointed at the crimelord. Butterfly closed his eyes. “Alright then...”, he mumbled. “Seems like we skip the negotiations” He raised his hand, but before he could lower it again, the sound of a door getting opened interrupted him. For a short moment, Jaron’s heart beat wildly as he hoped that Martin would enter the warehouse. But the small ray of sunlight that fell into the building illuminated not only the dozen men who surrounded him and Harpy, but also a man he had never seen before.

“Butterfly!”, the newcomer shouted. “Martin Wilshire has been sighted at the docks! He has almost a dozen men with him and he’s heading towards our position” Butterfly narrowed his eyes and looked back at Jaron, who couldn’t resist to smirk triumphantly. “Oh, you little bastard”, the crimelord whispered. “You’re going to regret that” He looked towards his men. “Tom!”, he shouted and the man with the white cat mask took a step towards him. “Yes, Butterfly?”, he asked in a monotone voice.

“Take the Moggy and retreat to the headquarters. Gather twenty good men and return here. You have one hour”, Butterfly ordered him and even through the mask and the darkness, Jaron could see the displeased facial expression of the Tom. “What?”, he growled. “You’re sending me away?”

“You can spill their blood another time, but for now I need you to gather reinforcements and I need your best man to protect you”, Butterfly explained and the Tom gave him a reluctant nod. “If this is the Butterfly’s wish”, he mumbled and Butterfly gave him a short, pleased nod. “It is”, the crimelord answered and the Tom let out a sigh. “Moggy!”, he snarled and the giant moved closer like a loyal dog. “We’re leaving. You follow me and if anyone tries to stop us you kill them, do you understand?”

The Moggy gave him a slow nod and let out a deep growl. His red eyes moved towards Jaron and the aggressiveness in them caused the knight to shiver. He was glad that this man wouldn’t be among his enemies today. The Tom looked at Butterfly, slightly shaking his head. For a moment it looked like he was about to say something, but instead he just turned around and left the building through the backdoor. The Moggy followed close behind, his massive body having trouble in fitting through the door.

“And now you, Bastard...”, Butterfly whispered. “Ready to face the consequences of your actions?” And that was the moment in which Jaron realized that he wouldn't come any further with talking. He darted forwards, trying to hit Butterfly's unguarded chest with his sword. The crimelord took a quick step backwards, while moving his hand towards the hilt hanging on his belt, swiftly drawing a short, single-edged sword and parrying the strike. “All our cards are on the table, Ser Bastard”, Butterfly shouted with a mocking voice while quickly striking at Jaron's wounded arm. The knight barely managed to parry and being limited to using only one arm handicapped him tremendously. “Your pathetic attempt at killing me is over. Your friends will come too late. I offered you a chance, but you decided to die alongside your little bitch. And now... now we're going to end this!”, the crimelord exclaimed.

Out of the shadows, the sound of steel being drawn was heard. Robb looked around in fear, his hand moving to the hilt of his sword. “Robb, stay out of this and I will spare you!”, Butterfly promised and the mercenary visibly considered his offer. His hand was still on the hilt of his sword, but he took no further action. Jaron frowned at the thought that he had spared this coward from further beating yesterday. Right now, Robb would deserve every beating in the world in Jaron's eyes.

“Take them alive if possible!”, Butterfly commanded his men while he effortlessly parried another strike from Jaron. His riposte was quick, brutal and merciless, targeting Jaron's already wounded ribs. This time, Jaron didn't manage to parry the strike, instead he only managed to deflect it. It still hit him at the upper leg and the sound of steel clashing against steel was heard as Butterfly's sword failed to pierce the armour. Yet the blow was still hard enough to cause Jaron to stagger backwards.

Jaron heard the movement behind him, men closing in on him and Harpy. Before he could take a look over his shoulder, Butterfly attacked again. His blows lacked any skill, instead he held his sword almost like a cleaver, striking like a butcher, but he was strong, far stronger than Jaron would have been with both arms and he was surprisingly fast.

Still at the edge of the illuminated circle stood Robb, his right hand resting on the hilt of his sword. He looked from Butterfly to Jaron, apparently unsure what to do. And behind Jaron he heard a deep gurgle, the sound of steel falling to the ground and a surprised gasp. “Kill that bitch!”, a man behind him screamed in sudden panic before his voice turned into a gurgle and Jaron didn't even need to see what just happened. He saw the displeased expression on Butterfly's face and that was enough.

Still, as he quickly glimpsed over his shoulder he saw Harpy standing right behind him, facing a small crowd of men who slowly came closer. On the ground lay the first man who tried to attack her, his throat cut by his own blade. She was holding the sword as if she was holding a torch, as

if she was trying to scare away a group of wild animals. And the way these men moved reminded Jaron of exactly that, of animals closing in on their prey.

To his right another man stepped out of the shadows, slowly moving towards him, while Butterfly took the chance to attack again. The crimelord swung his sword in a high curve, nearly cleaving Jaron's head in if he hadn't managed to raise his sword in the last moment. Still, the force of the blow was enough to send Jaron staggering to the side and to the ground. Harpy gave him a worried look as she glanced at him over her shoulder and one of her opponents took this opportunity to attack her. She barely managed to raise her sword high enough to parry the strike and the force of it still nearly disarmed her. Her opponent's blade nearly grazed her cheek, but to Jaron's relief it only cut through thin air. A second man used the moment she needed to regain her balance to brutally club her on the head with the hilt of his sword. Harpy went to the ground, three men grabbing her, while Jaron still tried to get back to his feet again. Of course, she tried to resist, but had little to offer against one of the men who started to repeatedly punch her in her face.

Butterfly and one of his men walked towards Jaron, the crimelord having a malevolent grin on his face. "The whore is down, her bastard will follow", he growled and the man accompanying him raised his sword, ready to end Jaron's life. The knight raised his sword in a desperate attempt of parrying the strike, knowing fully well that he wasn't strong enough for this.

All of a sudden, Butterfly's expression changed, from malevolence to surprise, as the edge of a blade was thrust through his accomplices chest. The men went to the ground, clutching at the hole in his chest and revealed Robb, standing behind him. "Get her!", the mercenary shouted, as he turned around to face Butterfly, both men clearly boiling with anger.

"That was a mistake, Robb...", Butterfly growled, as Jaron managed to get on his knees again.

"I'm going to cut off your...", the crimelord continued, but Robb cut him off by charging at him.

"Not another word, you goddamn monster!", the mercenary screamed at the top of his lungs and forced Butterfly to get defensive as he started to deliver a series of fierce blows at him.

In the meantime, Jaron had managed to get to his feet again, storming towards the men who were still holding Harpy down. One of them was beating her, his knuckles already stained with her blood. He wasn't even paying attention to Jaron, but the rest of the men around him were.

One of them was kneeling on the ground, but quickly stood up as Jaron charged towards him.

"Should have stayed on the ground, bastard", he sneered and attempted to attack him. He didn't even manage to land a single attack as Jaron swiftly struck at his head, his sword slicing through his throat, sending him to the ground. The next man raised his sword and tried to jump at Jaron, ignoring his own defence in the process. Jaron rammed his sword through the man's unguarded stomach area, sending him to the ground, coughing up blood and desperately trying to hold his intestines inside of him.

Finally he came into reach of the monsters who were beating up Harpy. They were crouching on the ground, two of them were holding down her arms, while the third was punching her in the face. She was still conscious and desperately tried to break free from their grip, albeit her weak attempts were clearly chanceless. The dim light inside of the warehouse made it hard for them to notice Jaron, but as soon as he got close to them, they jumped up. The men who were holding her arms quickly drew their blades, the man who was hitting her had no time to do this. Jaron knew, it would have been wiser to attack the armed men first, but right now he did not care. Harpy's blood stained his opponent's knuckles and blind rage took control over Jaron as he cleaved the man's head nearly in half.

The two men who were left standing quickly took their chance at attacking Jaron from different sides. In a single second, Jaron noticed that he had made a mistake by attacking the unarmed man first. He raised his sword, parrying the strike coming from his right, while trying to move sideways to evade the strike coming from his left. To his surprise, the man to his right failed to parry Jaron's strike and was hit in the side. Any thoughts of triumph quickly left Jaron, as he realized that he wouldn't be able to evade the second strike. He raised his wounded left arm in a desperate attempt of protecting his unarmed head...

A shockwave of pain flashed through his arm as his opponent's sword hit the plated gauntlet. It failed to break through the armour, but caused easily enough pain to send Jaron to the ground as he screamed in sheer agony. The bone in his forearm was thumping with pain and tears were flowing down his face. His opponent raised his sword again, attempting to end it. Jaron closed his eyes...

...and opened them again as he heard movement, the sound of a blade hitting the ground, a surprised groan, someone gasping for air...

Harpy had jumped up, tackling Jaron's opponent to the ground, in her hand a large dagger. She had cleanly ripped open his throat with her blade and was screaming in rage as she raised her dagger again and again, spilling the dying man's blood around. Her face was badly bruised, blood was flowing out of her nose and from her cheeks, but the look in her eyes was truly murderous. Jaron's other opponent was lying on the ground, with blood flowing out of his wounded side. He had visible problems to breath and even though Jaron was no healer, it was clear that the man's wounds were fatal. At least for a short moment, there was no one attacking them.

Jaron used this opportunity to take a look around. Several men were still present in the warehouse, slowly closing in on Jaron and Harpy. They knew they only needed to wait. The pain in Jaron's arm was bad enough to make him struggle for consciousness. And Harpy was wounded, in blind rage and clearly unable to defend herself against half a dozen men. Behind them stood Butterfly, still fighting against Robb.

The mercenary was clearly the more skilled fighter, but he was visibly boiling in anger, which caused him to put less skill in his attacks. Butterfly on the other hand was stronger and faster, his blows hitting Robb like the kick of a horse. On top of that, Jaron noticed that Robb was ignoring his own defence, relying solely on forcing Butterfly to parry his fierce strikes. And indeed, Butterfly seemed to have problems to parry the attacks. Instead, he took a quick step sideways, letting Robb's blade only hit thin air, as his own sword darted towards the mercenary, cutting through leather and chainmail and flesh. Robb let out a grunt as the blade fell from his weak hand, looking down on the sword that was plunged in his abdomen. Butterfly grabbed him at the shoulder and slowly twisted the blade, causing Robb to gurgle in pain, as a gust of blood flew out of his mouth.

"You managed to put up a good fight, bastard", the crimelord shouted as he was pulling his sword out of Robb's body with a sickeningly squishing sound. "I could have needed someone like you in my ranks. You could have done good, you could have been a hero. Still, you chose to fight me, you stupid little prick!"

A merciless smile was seen on his face as he looked at the bloody blade. "Robb siding against me came as a surprise. In the end he was infected by the same sickness that cripples this city, the sickness that was caused by your girl and her pimp, the same sickness I see inside of you. And he paid the price for it, just as you will", he growled as his men were slowly closing in on Jaron and Harpy. Behind him, Robb did his last breath, as his body grew limp, as his eyes stopped moving. Butterfly pointed his blade at Jaron and Harpy. She had stopped stabbing her opponent and was now standing above Jaron, as if she tried to protect him. He was able to see her face, her bloody, bruised, tear-stained, unarguably beautiful face and the expression he saw made him shiver. She was ready to fight to the last breath if needed. Butterfly noticed it too and chuckled slightly. "And now you need a girl to protect you. Pathetic. You are pathetic, you and your little slu..."

He was cut off by the sound of the warehouses large door getting opened. Bright sunlight illuminated the building and Butterfly staggered backwards in surprise. His men hissed, almost like animals as they raised their hands, trying to shield their eyes from the sudden sunlight. Nearly a dozen men stood in the open door, armed to the teeth. Jaron recognized none of them, until a familiar face appeared in the crowd.

"Good day, you fucking insect", Martin said joyfully and a wide grin appeared on Jaron's face as he looked at Harpy. She had her eyes wide open in shock, in relief, her mouth opening and closing. Tears were still flowing down her face, but her mouth formed a manic grin as she was sinking to the ground. She was still holding on to her sword with her right hand, but her left found Jaron's arm and rested on it. The look she gave him meant the world to him. Butterfly on the other hand seemed to be surprisingly collected for a man who was suddenly outnumbered

two to one. "I really hope I am interrupting something here", Martin continued and pointed his sword at Butterfly. "We outnumber you two to one and my men have surrounded the warehouse. Give up and we can end this quickly"

In this moment, the backdoor behind Butterfly was opened with enough force to nearly rip it out of its angles and a huge figure stepped in. For a moment, Jaron feared that it was the Moggy, that Butterfly's back-up had arrived. But then he recognized the huge frame of Bakr al-Astapori, his partner Abbas following closely. Every ounce of the usual friendliness had vanished from Bakr's face as he looked at Butterfly, holding a large bearded axe in his massive hands. Abbas was armed with two short strangely curved swords, like the one that were usually used by the Dothraki.

"Greetings, Butterfly", Abbas said with mocking politeness, as the crimelords men were drawing away from them, gathering in the middle of the warehouse in an attempt to shield their leader. There were eight of them remaining, not counting the crimelord himself. Against him stood almost a dozen with Martin, as well as the two Ghiscari. "My name is Abbas al-Yunkari and this loveable brute next to me is my friend and business partner Bakr al-Astapori", Abbas introduced himself. "It's hard to make a man like me angry, but you... oh, you disgust me. Today I am here for one thing..." He pointed one of his blades at the crimelord. "To give you fucking bastard exactly what you deserve"

"What I deserve?", Butterfly asked with a dangerously low voice. "You want to give me what I deserve?" Before Martin could answer, a young woman whom Jaron had never seen before stepped up. Her skin was as pale as snow and her hair was dark blonde, tied up to a strict bun. Her face was gaunt, but still pretty to look at, while the expression in her light blue eyes was full of hatred. She was holding a small hatchet in each hand and was clearly trembling with anger. "You're Butterfly?", she asked and her voice shivered and cracked.

Butterfly took a mocking bow. "What's it to you, you whore?", he asked and a cruel smile appeared on the woman's face. "Leave him to me...", she growled at Martin and he gave her a short nod. Butterfly on the other hand let out a sigh. "Another one who wants to kill me. How annoying", he snarled, pointing his sword at Martin and his men. "I won't go down easy. You want me? First you have to pay, with blood! Get them, boys!", he screamed and his men answered with a loud warcry before they began charging at Martin and his mercenaries, at Abbas, at Bakr. None of them even paid attention to Jaron and Harpy. She finally let go of her sword, the blade falling to the ground with a loud noise as she fell backwards onto the ground, right next to Jaron. A blissful smile appeared on her face as she looked at him. "It's over...", she mumbled. "He can't win this..."

Indeed, Butterfly's men were vastly outnumbered, but they still managed to put up a surprisingly good fight. And they refused to run and refused to yield. They preferred to die for their master.

The first to die was one of Martin's mercenaries, who was nearly eviscerated by one of Butterfly's men until Martin stepped in. Butterfly himself managed to kill a man who dared to attack him, before the blonde woman who spoke earlier managed to engage into single combat with him. Her hatchets had a clear disadvantage over Butterfly's sword, but she did not seem to be hindered by this. Instead, she quickly forced him into the defensive, like Robb had done earlier, her hatchets delivering a rain of strikes and blows that made it hard for Butterfly to defend himself.

To Jaron's right, Bakr's massive axe split the skull of one of his opponent's in half, while Abbas was spinning around, fighting against two enemies at once. His fighting style reminded Jaron of the braavosi water dance, while Bakr simply relied on brutal strength. None of Butterfly's men was a match for them.

Martin quickly dispatched of another opponent and darted towards Jaron and Harpy, while Butterfly was still fighting for his life behind him. The whole battle was over quickly, as Butterfly's men were chanceless against the Burned Man's mercenaries. Martin himself took a glance over his shoulder, where Butterfly was still fighting against the blonde-haired woman. The crimelord was surrounded by the surviving mercenaries, but he still refused to give up. It was clear that he was defeated, but even if he wanted to give up, the woman did not look ready to allow him.

Joyful laughter sounded as Harpy was running towards Martin. The mercenary threw his blades on the ground and grabbed her at the waist, raising her high in the air while spinning her around in rejoicement. She was still wearing her brazen hairpin, albeit a few strands of reddish brown hair were loosened, flowing freely in the wind as she tightly hugged Martin. "We won...", she mumbled, her eyes wide opened in amazement. Martin's smile vanished as he looked towards the crimelord, who was still fighting. "Not yet...", he growled. He let go of Harpy and slowly walked to his men. She gave Jaron a short look, before grabbing his healthy arm with both of her hands. "Can you stand up?", she asked and Jaron gave her a reluctant nod. "I hope so...", he mumbled and a worried expression flashed over her face. Softly, but with determination, she pulled him back to his feet, clutching his healthy hand up to the point where it almost hurt. Jaron did not mind. In this moment he barely noticed the thumping pain in his left arm, the tiredness that was rising inside of him. They were alive. They had won! Almost at least...

Butterfly and the blonde-haired woman had just exchanged a few blows and were now circling around each other like wolves, trying to spot a weakness in the other one's defences. "Stay back!", she shouted as one of the mercenaries attempted to attack Butterfly's unguarded back. "He's mine!"

The crimelord had an almost courteous smirk on his face and nearly took a bow in front of her. "Oh, my lady, what have I done to deserve your hatred?", he asked. "I never forget a face, but I still can't remember you" She narrowed her eyes, her stare piercing at him. "My name is

Samantha Ducard...", she growled. "You ordered my families death, just to train one of your killers!" She spat these words at him and Butterfly raised an eyebrow. "Ah, you're from the North then...", he answered. "I see... that makes sense. If it gives you some comfort, I'm sure your worthless family deserved it!"

Jaron immediately realized that the crimelord took it too far with this. Provoking an enemy was always a risky move. Robb had been too angry to fight without mistakes and that caused his death. Samantha on the other hand was even more angry, her facial expression twisted with fury and hatred. She was beyond simple anger and she wouldn't make a mistake. If anything, Butterfly's death just got a lot more painful.

She let out a cry of pure, helpless rage as she started to deliver a hurricane of blows at Butterfly, faster than anything Jaron had ever seen. The crimelord's lack of skill became apparent now as he barely managed to parry or dodge her strikes. He was forced to take a few steps backwards, while she followed closely, attacking him with both weapons simultaneously. A simple feint proved to be his undoing as a strike that was seemingly aimed for his upper arm hit him in the upper leg instead. The hatchet easily broke through Butterfly's trousers, causing a deep gash at his left upper leg. The crimelord let out a cry of pain, but managed to parry her second hatchet regardless before going down on his knees.

Even now he was only slightly smaller than Samantha, his shoulders still twice as broad as hers. He had grabbed his sword with both hands, parrying the hatchet she was holding in her left hand. With a squishing sound she was removing her second hatchet from his leg, causing Butterfly to grimace in agony. Out of a reflex, his left hand moved down to clutch his bleeding leg. Jaron noticed the smirk on Harpy's face as Samantha raised the hatchet in her right hand and he knew what the woman was about to do. She could have split his skull right now, she could have cut his throat. She could have given him an easy death. Instead her hatchet moved down almost too quick for Jaron's eyes to follow, hitting Butterfly's arm and cleanly severing his right sword hand at the wrist.

For a single second, Butterfly did not react to the injury. He just knelt on the ground, looking at the stump where his hand used to be. A groan of sheer agony forced it's way out of his throat and he looked from his wound to Samantha's cold face, his own facial expression being located somewhere between agony, disbelief and shock. But he did not scream.

Just as he was about to sink backwards to the ground, Samantha grabbed him at the collar of his shirt with her left hand, preventing him from sliding to the ground. Tears were flowing down Butterfly's face as he visibly resisted the urge to scream. His stare moved back to his bleeding stump, to the severed hand on the ground and to Samantha. For a short moment, no one said a word, not even Harpy, who was still clutching Jaron's hand. And then, Samantha raised the hatchet in her right hand.

“This is for all the people you killed!”, she shouted, slamming the hilt of her hatchet down into his face. The force of the blow was enough to cause a cracking sound as it hit the crimelord's nose. “For all the families you've destroyed!”, she yelled again, violently hitting his mouth with the wooden hilt of her hatchet. Butterfly's head was pushed back and he had to spit on the ground, a mixture of saliva and blood and teeth. “For all the lives you have stolen!”, Samantha screamed, hitting him in the nose again, completely smashing it. “This is your reckoning, you son of a bitch!”

With these words she delivered a series of brutal blows to his face, slamming the hilt of her hatchet into his ruined mouth, against his slightly dislocated jaw, into his smashed nose and deep into his left eye. As she pulled it back, the hilt of her hatchet was stained with his blood, his face a broken ruin. One of his eyes was bleeding red, clearly destroyed. His nose was smashed beyond recognition, his jaw dislocated and his open mouth revealed that at least half of his teeth weren't more than shattered stumps. Finally, Samantha let go of Butterfly, allowing him to sink to the ground, where he was breathing heavily, still alive, still conscious, but shattered and broken. The moment of mercy was gone as quickly as it came and Samantha violently stomped on Butterfly's unprotected crotch. The force of the kick caused a barely conscious Butterfly to scream in pain and in terror as he involuntarily spat a mixture of blood and saliva into her face. With a disgusted expression, Samantha took a step backwards, looking around at the mercenaries. “Do you have any last words, you disgusting pig?”, she asked.

“Wait!”, another voice shouted. Harpy. Jaron looked towards her and shortly met her gaze. He did not like what he saw. Of course, she looked pleased and he couldn't hold this against her. But there was something else in her eyes, something dark. Years of fear and despair were visible on her face, years in which she had cowered in terror under Butterfly.

“He is not yours to kill”, Harpy mumbled. She and Samantha looked each other in the eye and the hateful expression in the woman's face vanished, showing a deep understanding. “I see...”, Samantha answered sullenly. “He is all yours”

Harpy gave her a nod and grabbed the brazen hairpin, pulling it out of her hair in a quick movement. Long strands of reddish brown hair fell down to her shoulders as she was clutching onto the hairpin. “That one's going to be more painful”, she mumbled and it was unclear if she was talking to anyone in specific. Jaron and Martin exchanged a worried look and the knight walked up to her, putting his unwounded hand onto her shoulder. She tensed up under his touch and gave him a short and frightened glare that quickly got warmer as she recognized him.

“Harpy are you...”, he attempted to say, but she cut him off. “Don't...”, she answered quickly. “Just... don't...” She looked back at Butterfly, whose expression of pain had vanished. Instead, his usual infuriating smirk had returned. “Settling the score, right, you fucking whore?”, he growled and his voice sounded barely intelligible.

"You are awfully smug for a man who is about to die...", Harpy answered and Butterfly gave her a weak nod. "I know, even if you kill me you have lost", he revealed. "You failed to kill the Tom. Samuel and Jaylon weren't here. All my other lieutenants. They are still out there. You think they will just give up? Think again..."

He raised the stump of his right arm, looking at it while a mad smile was formed on his face.

"You can kill me, but you can't kill Butterfly. This dream is bigger than me. If you kill me, my men will do everything to avenge my death. I am the one keeping them in line. Without me, this city will drown in violence", he explained. "But I don't want to die. I am willing to retreat. I am willing to give up and to withdraw from this city"

"And why should I allow this?", Harpy spat. She attempted to get closer to him, but Jaron raised his arm in her way, forcing her to stop. Butterfly gave him a grin. "Clever bastard", he complimented him. "Keeping your bitch on a leash, so that the men can talk in peace. She is a dumb child. But you... you are cunning, am I right? You realize the chance I give you. Take me back to your cripple and I am willing to talk"

"The hell we're going to do!", Harpy growled. "Get out of my way, Jaron. He has to die!" Butterfly slightly shook his head. "Proves my point. Stop her from killing me and we can end this war", he explained. "I only need one more thing in this city, something that is not concerning you or the Burned Man. At this moment, Samuel is getting it for me and when he has it, I am willing to retreat. I will take all of my men with me"

"You can't trust him!", Harpy yelled. "Don't let his lies cloud your judgement. Step aside and let me kill him!" She looked past Jaron towards Butterfly. "You are going to curse the day you were born, you monster! When I am done with you, you will beg for death"

A weak laughter found its way out of Butterfly's throat. "Oh, shut up you worthless halfbreed harlot!", he growled. "You want me to beg for my death? Let me tell you how it's done. I took their tiny hands and chopped off their fingers, one by one. I enjoyed their high-pitched screams when I blinded them. I whispered into their ear 'Butterfly, Butterfly', so that they don't forget my name... Many of them screamed your name, begged you to help them. But you never did. And it took me a while to punish them for all their crimes, but then... That's how you make someone beg for death" He looked at Harpy, who stood there frozen in terror. "Is that what you want to do?"

His remaining eye looked back at Jaron and his smile got even more cruel. "You hate me for what I am, but still you can't bring yourself to kill me, right? You are a little honourable knight. You have moral guidelines that make you so much better than me, you self-righteous little prick! I am wounded and unarmed and willing to surrender. I know you have to do everything to stop this stupid child from killing me, by your honour!", he growled and tried to spit Jaron in the face. The blood barely managed to leave his mouth.

"You are not as stupid as your cross-breed cunt here, right?", Butterfly hissed and Harpy was trembling with anger, the hairpin in her hand shivering. "You can see what I am offering you here. Kill me and continue the war. Spare me, allow me to take one last thing, this thing that does not affect you at all. Spare me and this war is over"

Butterfly stopped, looking at his arm stump. "I offered you peace!", he spat and the sudden yelling was enough to surprise even Harpy. "I offered you peace, I always did. Peace for this city, peace for everyone who would only abide the law. All will be well, he promised it, he promised it to me! I always offered you nothing but peace and look how you repaid me!" He raised the bleeding stump and pointed it at Jaron. "I gave you everything and look how you repaid me...", the broken crimelord mumbled.

"Step aside...", Harpy mumbled softly, tears flowing down her face. "Let me end his life. You know we can't trust him. Just put your honour aside for once, Jaron. This was never about honour. This was never about justice. This was about our survival" Her stare got bleak as she looked away from him and from Butterfly. "This is about our survival. Yours. Mine. Martin's. Ellena's. All the others who are threatened by him. This is not about your honour. As long as he is alive, we can't be safe. As long as he is alive, we..." She paused and started to weep in grief. "All the lives he destroyed and still he has the audacity to beg for mercy", she mumbled and as she looked up, her eyes were full of hatred.

"Oh, the little bitch is angry...", Butterfly mocked her. "Hold her back, bastard. You know it's the right choice. We both know you are too honourable to allow her to kill a man who is not a danger anymore"

"But he is...", Harpy mumbled. "He can't be trusted. As long as he is alive, he will continue to hunt us. Step aside and let me end this threat. Let me end this, allow me to make him pay!" Her teary eyes met Jaron's stare and the knight never felt that conflicted before. Butterfly was right, killing a wounded and unarmed man wasn't honourable. But Harpy was right too. He deserved it and worse.

"Come on, bastard. Get me to the Burned Man, I don't have time all day for your shit!", Butterfly shouted and Harpy growled something in barely intelligible Ghiscari. "I will make you pay", she hissed in Westerosi again. "Just once before you die, you will learn the true meaning of fear, you will learn what pain is. Just once, you will beg like you made them beg"

Butterfly let out an annoyed sigh. "Do not give promises you can't keep", he mumbled. "Your honourable prick of a bastard knight has to stop you, we both know it. And do me a favour, shut your whoring mouth, for I am tired of your words!"

Harpy narrowed her eyes and focussed her stare at his remaining eye. "I will hear you scream before you die", she promised and Jaron had no doubt that she would do her best to keep this promise. He knew, Butterfly would deserve it. But what if he was saying the truth? What if this

war could be ended by sparing him? What if he would retreat? And what if he was lying? Could he trust him?

[Step aside and allow her to kill Butterfly] [Try to convince Harpy to spare Butterfly]

Jaron

He gave Harpy a short nod, before lowering his arm. "Do it", he mumbled and a light smile appeared on her face. "Thank you", she answered and her smile faded again. "Perhaps... perhaps you want to wait outside. Not sure if you want to see this..." Jaron slightly shook his head. "I won't go anywhere", he answered and it was meant reassuring. Instead she only looked more worried. "Perhaps you're not going to like what you see...", she warned him and Jaron shrugged. "Doesn't matter", he answered. "I won't leave right now" Harpy gave him a regretful nod. "Sorry for what I'm about to do", she muttered, while looking at him.

"Oh, get a room you two!", Butterfly snarled, but Jaron noticed that the smug grin on his bruised face was gone. Harpy shot him a glare full of hatred and the crimelord attempted to crawl backwards with his remaining hand. She slowly walked up to him and he gave her a visibly forced smile. "Come on, you foreign cunt!", he growled and spat at the ground in front of her. "Do your worst!"

"Don't you worry, I will", Harpy mumbled and the cold tone of her voice sent a shiver down Jaron's spine. "I'm obviously going to remove a few parts. Some of them for the better. It's going to be sad for your remaining eye, but I'm sure all will be well in the end", she continued, mirroring Butterfly's words earlier. "For me at least. For you? Not so much"

Butterfly's grin vanished, replaced by a look that barely hid his genuine fear. "Ser Bastard...", he mumbled. "Stop that crazy bitch..." Jaron did not answer and only gave him a cold glare. For a short moment he felt satisfaction at the dumbfounded look on Butterfly's face. "You... you were supposed to...", the crimelord mumbled. "He told me you would..."

Harpy silenced him by violently kicking him against the jaw, causing his head to fall back on the ground, where he lied barely conscious. "Martin!", she commanded and the mercenary walked up to her. He had a worried look on his face, clearly reluctant to follow her order this time. "Grab his left arm. Make sure he can't move"

With these words she knelt down onto his right arm, applying clearly uncomfortable pressure on his stump. Butterfly let out a groan of pain and attempted to grab her with his remaining hand. Martin was faster and grabbed his arm at the wrist, holding it down on the ground. Out of the corner of his eyes, Jaron saw Samantha folding her arms in anticipation.

Butterfly's sickening grin reappeared, albeit it was a desperate grin, the grin of a dying man. "You stinking mongrel harlot, you fucking coward, you even need help to keep me down. Even

now I could kill you!", he spat and Harpy gave him no answer. She looked at the hairpin in her hand, slowly putting it on the ground. "That's for later...", she explained and raised a hand. "First I'm going to need a knife"

One of the mercenaries walked up to her, slowly handing a small dagger to her. She gave him a thankful nod and looked at Jaron, almost pleading. "You really want to stay?", she asked and Jaron gave her a nod. "Not leaving you now", he answered and Harpy closed her eyes. "Fine then...", she muttered and Butterfly's grin got wider. "Oh, little whore is afraid her bastard won't like her anymore. Isn't that cute?", he mocked her. "Come on, show him what you really are!" He looked at Jaron. "You think she's any better than me just because of her pretty face? Look closely, bastard, see her for what she is, this worthless fucking who..."

His speech was cut off by Harpy quickly moving the dagger downwards, ramming it into his crotch. Butterfly's eyes widened as a high-pitched groan forced its way out of his throat. He looked downwards, to the dagger and to Harpy, who had a look of pure hatred on her face. "Four years...", she hissed, her ghiscari accent clearly audible. The tone of her voice was enough to make Jaron shiver. "For the past four years I was almost afraid of my own shadow, fearing that you could hide in it. Every week I forced myself to look at what you did to people I considered friends, family. All these years I was afraid of one man... but you are no man, aren't you?"

She moved closer towards him, almost like a lover and whispered something in his ears. It was completely silent in the warehouse, so Jaron was still able to hear it. "Do you remember what I promised you?", she asked and Butterfly's eyes widened in fear. "That I would hear you scream before you die?" With these words, she started to twist the knife. And Butterfly started to scream.

"Nearly two hundred", she spat, speaking louder than before, while Butterfly let out high-pitched, pained screams full of fear, full of agony. The crimelord tried to break free from her grip but failed to do so, which only intensified his horrifying screams. Harpy pulled the dagger out of Butterfly's crotch, before stabbing it in a violent frenzy. "I remember all of their names, remember their voices, I remember what they looked like and what you made out of them! How I had to look at them, how I held them until their pain was over! You couldn't even give them a clean death!", she spat at him and moved the dagger upward with a squishing sound, causing Butterfly to wail in pain, before putting it on the ground, grabbing the hairpin. The crimelord tried his best to break free of Harpy's grip, to no avail. He had no strength left and the terror in his remaining eye was almost satisfying, but utterly horrifying at the same time.

With a swift movement, Harpy rammed the hairpin into Butterfly's abdomen. "You raped them!", she screamed and stabbed him again. "Mutilated them! You broke them until there was nothing left of them! You put them through pain beyond imagination!" With each word she stabbed him

again. Despite her rage, Jaron saw that she was careful not to hit a vital organ and not to stab him too deeply. "How does it feel to suffer like they did? How does it feel, HOW DOES IT FEEL?", Harpy yelled, stabbing him between the ribs, into the stomach, finally embedding it into his left lung.

Butterfly had stopped screaming now, instead he was only moaning, his mouth forming words that weren't audible anymore. "How does it feel to suffer for once in your life, you miserable son of a bitch?", Harpy asked him, desperate tears were flowing down her face. "HOW DOES IT FEEL?", she desperately screamed at him, but received no answer. "DO YOU LIKE IT?" Even if he would have been able to give her an answer, Butterfly would have probably remained silent. The crimelord was dying, bleeding from over a dozen wounds. Harpy herself looked heartbreakingly horrified at her own hands, looking mortified at the mutilated crimelord and at what she just did. Her gaze hardened for one last time as she moved the hairpin down, slowly pushing it through Butterfly's throat. His moaning turned into gurgling, as bubbles of blood flew out of his mouth. "You are nothing...", Harpy sullenly whispered into his ear as the crimelord stopped moving.

She raised from the ground, looking paler than usual, disgusted and clearly ashamed at herself. The sadness on her face nearly broke Jaron's heart. As she staggered backwards, he took a quick step towards her, grabbing her with his good arm to prevent her from falling. She was crying bitter tears and did not look even nearly as satisfied as she should have been. "It needed to be done right?", she mumbled and Jaron gave her a tight hug. "It's over. We made it, we won, haven't we?", she whispered, looking down onto the dead body of the man who had terrorized her for years. It was over...

Lucas

For a moment, Lucas thought that the guards would stop them as they approached the Hightower almost running. He wasn't sure what he would have done then. His mind was revolving around one thing, about what was happening to Lunett at this moment. Luckily, the guards let them pass without a word, at least into the main hall of the Hightower. The cold, large room was far less lively than it had been a few hours ago, with only a few guards looking at them.

Lucas still remembered the way to the headquarters of the city guard. It wasn't a long or complicated way, but for a moment Lucas feared that the guards of the Hightower could stop them. He did not care to explain himself to them, he had no time for that. Only one thing mattered, to get help from Mullendore.

The main room of the headquarters was far more empty than before. Only about a dozen of guardsmen were in it, looking at the newcomers with slight interest. They sat around two large

tables, playing cards and showing with their whole attitude that they were on their break at the moment. For a moment, Lucas thought about approaching one of them, but his panicked legs immediately led him towards Mullendore's room, which in turn caused several guards to give him a suspicious glare. Lucas did not care. Desperately, he tried to open the room, but to no avail. The door was locked.

"Can I help you?", a male voice asked and Lucas turned around to see one of the guardsmen who just approached him. He was a young and very ugly man, skinny, with a round and puffy face, wrinkles around his eyes and a gross-looking stubble beard. Lucas gave him a desperate nod, while trying to find the right words. "We're looking for Ser Maron Mullendore. It is important", Leonard answered in his stead.

The man gave him an apologetic smile. "Commander Mullendore is on patrol duty. Can I give him a message from you?", he asked, while Lucas and Leonard exchanged a desperate look. "But... he had been here a few hours ago", Lucas stuttered dumbfounded and the guard slightly shrugged. "And now he is on patrol duty. Commander Mullendore takes his duty very seriously. I'm asking again, can I give him a message from you?", he answered.

"Listen, we need help", Leonard urged him. "Do you know Samuel Harrington? The Fang of Shadows?" The guard widely opened his eyes as Leonard mentioned this name and immediately gave him a serious look. "The Fang of Shadows...", he mumbled. "One of Butterfly's best men, perhaps his most dangerous. Killed at least half a dozen of our boys. What is it with him?"

"He's at the Blind Helmsman Inn", Lucas explained as calm as possible. He was nearly yelling at this man, but luckily the guard seemed to be understanding of this. He put a hand on Lucas' shoulder, trying to calm him down a bit. "Please, tell me everything", he urged him. Lucas looked at Leonard for help and thankfully, the other knight continued to talk as Lucas tried to hold back desperate tears. Every second they were losing was a second he was hardly able to bear.

"My name is Leonard Constantine, this is Lucas Flowers. We are knights from the city of Raylansfair, currently in this city for our own business. For reasons unknown, we got the attention of this Butterfly person. And he sent Harrington to the inn we're living in. We are afraid for the safety of our friend Lunett", Leonard explained and the guardsman gave him an understanding nod.

"I see", he answered. "Normally I would tell you to wait until Commander Mullendore or Captain Ryder would be back from their duty..." Lucas cut him off by grabbing his shoulders. "We don't have time for that!", he yelled at him, causing the guardsman to push him off in slight irritation. "Let me finish, Ser Lucas!", he ordered him sternly. "Normally I would do this. But it looks like this is an urgent matter. If you're lying to me, it will cost me my job"

"We're not lying", Lucas stuttered, slightly ashamed at his panicked behaviour. The guardsman let out a sigh and clapped his hands, pointing at six of the guardsmen. "You, get ready!", he ordered them. "The Fang of Shadows was seen nearby and someone needs to stop him!" Visibly unwilling to help, the guards raised from their comfortable chairs, starting to get ready by putting on chainmail armour and their swords. The guard who spoke to Lucas and Leonard seemed to be satisfied. "Give us a minute. They know how to do this", he told them before reaching out his hand. Lucas did not react, but Leonard grabbed the hand, shaking it with enthusiasm. "Thank you", he told him and the guard slightly smirked. "Don't mention it", he answered. "By the way, my name is Jaylon. Captain Jaylon Gordus"

Jaylon kept his word. It took the guardsmen only a minute to get armed and ready. The captain himself grabbed a crossbow, quickly loading it with experienced moves. Lucas noticed that the armour these guards were wearing was different from the usual guard uniform. Instead of the red and grey of House Hightower, these men wore the black and orange of House Mullendore, their tabards showing the six butterflies of Uplands. Jaylon noticed Lucas questioning stare and gave him a light smirk. "We're part of Ser Maron's special unit, not of the regular city guard. You won't find more experienced fighters against Butterfly and the Burned Man in the whole city", he explained. Lucas barely listened, his mind preoccupied, as he was nearly shaking in worry. Leonard seemed to be similarly stressed, but handled it far better. Small details, like his fast breathing and pressed lips revealed that he was worried sick for Lunett and Dairon, just like Lucas was.

Lucas barely remembered the next fifteen minutes, as if he was in a dream. Leonard had taken charge of the small group, consisting of Captain Jaylon and six of his special guards. Lucas was thankful for Leonard's initiative, as he was barely able to focus on the way in his current state of mind. Everything seemed to blur and it took him a while to realize that he was crying.

The sun was already downing and Leonard lead the group through the streets of Oldtown. Only a few people were still walking on the streets and all of them swiftly made way for the heavily armed group. Jaylon had a surprisingly pleased smile on his face as they finally reached the Helmsman inn. "Ah, the Blind Helmsman. Excellent taste in inns you have, Ser Lucas", he said with a grin. Lucas did not reciprocate this grin and Jaylon gave him an apologizing look. "Sorry for that. It was inappropriate", he apologized shortly before looking at his men. "Surround the inn. I want three of you in the backalley, should Harrington decide to retreat there. The rest with me", he ordered, checking his crossbow and slightly looking at Lucas and Leonard. "The Fang is not an easy opponent You sure you want to do this?", he asked. Leonard gave him a decisive nod, drawing his sword. "I'm not an easy opponent either and he's going to learn that. If he did anything to Lunett or... if he did anything to Lunett, I'm going to cut him open", he answered.

Jaylon shrugged and looked slightly amused for a moment. "Other men tried to do it. The Fang is still here. They aren't", he stated. "I say it's about time someone kills this asshole", Leonard growled before moving closer towards the inn. Jaylon's face dropped for a moment. "Fuck, wait for us!", he hissed before quickly walking after Leonard. Lucas followed closely, resisting the urge to run. They needed to be cautious, or else it would be over, for them and for Lunett.

The taproom was strangely empty, even though it was late in the evening. It was dark and Lucas was barely able to see the figure lying on the ground in a pool of dark liquid. He and Jaylon looked at each other with an alarmed look and the guardsman quickly sneaked up to the body. Under closer inspection, Lucas recognized the elderly innkeeper, clutching a small hole in his abdomen. He was badly beaten up, his face bruised up to the point where he was hardly able to look at the small group that was approaching him.

"Who... who is there? Please... please let me live. No more!", the innkeeper pleaded, raising his hands in the rough direction of Lucas, Leonard and Jaylon. The guardsman knelt down to him, putting one of his hands onto his shoulder. "Easy, man", he tried to calm him down. "We're from the city guard. We are here to help. Can you walk?"

The man gave him a nod and weakly tried to stand up, before falling down again with a pained moan. Jaylon slightly shook his head as he looked at Lucas. "What happened here?", he asked and the innkeeper let out a sigh. "I was in the backroom when I heard some sort of commotion. People... fleeing the inn. I returned to the taproom and there was this man... He... he...", the old man explained and clutched the wound in his abdomen with a pained expression. "He stabbed you, right?", Jaylon asked and the old man gave him a nod. "The Fang of Shadows?" The innkeeper shook his head. "No... no, he told me his name. He told me not to forget it. Not the Fang of Shadows. He was here too, but he wasn't the one who stabbed me", he answered desperately. "It was Butterfly..."

Just as he said this, even before Lucas realized the meaning of these words, a bloodcurdling scream sounded from upstairs. Lucas froze in terror as he recognized the voice. It was without a doubt Lunett! In a deep part of his mind, Lucas knew it was a foolish move to storm upstairs, but in this moment he did not care anymore. Lunett was in danger, likely hurt. He remembered what Mullendore told him, what Butterfly would do to her. This was not the time to be cautious! And then he started to run towards the stairs that lead to the second floor.

"Fuck", Jaylon cursed and Lucas noticed that Leonard was right behind him. "Wait for me!", the guardsman yelled and ran after them, his crossbow still resting in his hands. The three men ran up the stairs, barely catching breath and Lucas already noticed a dizzy feeling in his head.

Rest... he needed to rest, but first he had to find Lunett, he had to save her!

The narrow hallway upstairs wasn't empty. Lucas noticed two things. First, the way to Lunett's room was free. Second, on the other end of the hallway sat a man on a stool, quietly sharpening

his longsword. He looked frighteningly ordinary, his looks only underlining his dangerous aura. He had the pale skin and dark hair of a northerner, his blue eyes glaring at the knights. He wasn't blocking the hallway physically, but his mere presence was enough to cause Lucas to stop. This wasn't a man he could just ignore.

"Harrington", Jaylon growled with a low voice and Lucas noticed that he showed signs of fear. The man silently raised from his chair, presenting his recently sharpened longsword. "You're late", he snarled, slowly walking closer towards them. Lucas and Leonard immediately pointed their swords at him and the man stopped for a moment. "And you're too late to save her", he explained and Lucas felt panic rising in him. "You should have saved yourself. No one can help you now"

"What are you waiting for?", Leonard growled and looked at Jaylon. "Shoot him!" The guardsman gave him a reluctant nod and pointed his crossbow at Harrington. His hands were shaking violently, almost as bad as Lucas', but his stare was focussed. "Give up, Harrington, or I'm going to kill you"

Harrington stopped moving closer towards them, unfurling his arms with a mocking smirk. "You have one try, Jaylon", he said with a slight grin and pointed his sword at them. Jaylon gulped audibly, before firing his crossbow. The bolt flew at Harrington, missing him only by a few inches. The man didn't even flinch. "Wasted bolt", he remarked with a smirk, before continuing to approach them. "Butterfly is already done with your girl, Ser Lucas. You are too late and now you will die here too"

To Lucas surprise and horror, Leonard took a step forwards. "Not so fast", the knight growled. "And certainly not while I'm still breathing" He drew his sword, pointing it at Harrington. The other man slightly shook his head. "What are you trying to do?", he asked and Leonard spat on the ground in front of him, causing Harrington to stop moving. "What does it look like, asshole?", the knight answered. "Lucas, Jaylon, save Lunett and run!"

"Leonard...", Lucas mumbled, but Jaylon cut him off. "Are you sure?", he asked and Leonard gave him a nod, while Harrington just looked at him. Lucas knew it was a dangerous move. The hallway was narrow, hardly giving enough room to fight with a longsword. Leonard wasn't wearing his armour and he was exhausted from the quick run back to the inn. "What are you waiting for, Flowers?", Leonard growled. "I said, get Lunett out of here!" Jaylon let out a sigh. "Very well then...", he mumbled. "Do me a favour and kill him"

"I will", Leonard and Harrington answered at the same time. The knight raised his sword, taking the initiative against Harrington as he attempted to strike at his head. The mercenary answered by easily parrying the strike and giving Leonard a quick riposte that took the knight a lot of skill to parry.

"Come on!", Jaylon yelled at Lucas, grabbing him at the shoulder. "Where is your girl's room?" This caused Lucas to snap out of the almost trance-like stance he had been, watching Leonard and Harrington in their deadly fight. The mercenary swiftly struck at Leonard's abdomen and the knight was only able to save himself by taking a step backwards. Without giving him a chance at a counter-attack, Harrington immediately struck again, this time targeting Leonard's head. Lucas finally turned around, running towards Lunett's room. He could only hope that Leonard would win this fight, but Harrington was by all means at least an evenly matched opponent. But he wouldn't let his sacrifice be in vain!

"This is it?", Jaylon asked as Lucas stopped in front of a door. The knight gave him a light nod, before busting into the room. It was dark, a single candle illuminating the scenery. The room was thrashed, a horrifyingly fresh pool of blood visible on the ground. Lucas couldn't see Lunett, but he saw a figure standing at the sole window, slowly turning around as the knight entered. Lucas froze in terror, nearly dropping his blade as he saw the face. No... No, this could not be! How...

"Hello, boys", Maron Mullendore said with a devilish smile on his face. "What took you so long?" "Ser... Ser Maron?", Lucas exclaimed weakly. "What are you... doing..." He noticed movement behind him and as he swiftly turned around, he saw Jaylon pointing the crossbow at him. The smile on the face of the ugly guard almost made him appear like a rabid wolf. "Turn around, bastard, face him or else I'm going to blow your brains out"

"Good job, Jaylon", Mullendore complimented his underling, before giving him a questioning stare. "Where's the other boy, Constantine?", he asked. Jaylon slightly chuckled, sounding like a hyena in the process. "Fighting Samuel", he remarked and Mullendore let out a sigh. "Another dead man", he mumbled.

"What in the...", Lucas stuttered completely dumbfounded, in a clear state of shock as he was trying to understand what was happening right now. The realization hit him like a punch in the face and he nearly jumped up in terror as he looked back at Mullendore. "You... you're Butterfly!", he exclaimed.

The man gave him a slight nod, his devilish grin getting even wider. "The one and only", he said with pride in his voice. "Oh, don't look at me like that!" He spread his arms and any trace of honesty, politeness and kindness were gone from his green eyes. Instead, he had a steely gaze and Lucas hated what he saw in them. "I know what you must think. Who would actually use his own sigil as a code name? But that's not the question...", Mullendore snarled. "The question is, who would actually suspect the man who's sigil is a literal Butterfly?" His grin vanished as he narrowed his eyes, giving him an almost monstrous appearance. "Only fools would do this. And do I have to fear fools?"

"But...", Lucas stuttered. "But... you... you... lost... you lost... men..." Mullendore let out a deep, joyless chuckle, full of hatred. "Oh yes, who would suspect a man who lost his own men? Good men, loyal men, men who learned too much and weren't willing take necessary steps to save this city? Who would suspect me?"

Finally, the numbing shock started to vanish, as Lucas remembered why he came here in the first place. He pointed his sword at Mullendore, at... at Butterfly and the only thing that prevented him from attacking him immediately was the presence of Jaylon behind him. "What have you done to Lunett? Where is she?", Lucas yelled at him and Mullendore gave him a cold smirk.

"Do you remember what I told you? What Butterfly would do to her if he ever gets her?", he asked and Lucas hand started to shake as he suppressed the urge to burst into desperate tears. "Well, I originally wanted to wait for you to come, but you needed so long... so I decided to start already"

With these words, Mullendore raised one of his fingers. "Careful what you're going to do now, boy. She's in a... ahem... critical condition. Make a wrong move and you will regret it. Remember Jaylon behind you"

He started to walk around the bed, reaching down to the ground, where Lucas wasn't able to see. "I did not want to do this. I gave you more than one chance to be honest with me. After you left the Citadel with the boy, how could you even assume I wouldn't learn about him sooner or later?", Mullendore spat at him with vicious hatred in his voice. "I did not want to hurt her, but your impudence... greatly angered me"

He reached down and grabbed something... no, the pained moan that sounded made it clear that he was grabbing someone, Lunett to be precise and he dragged her from behind the bed and into Lucas' field of view, holding her at the hair. She was naked and weakly looked at him with tear-stained eyes, but said no word, instead she was sobbing desperately. He looked down on her body and the sudden realization almost caused him to drop his sword in despair. "No...", Lucas whispered as he looked at her in shock, at the place where Mullendore had severed both of her feet at the ankles. The wounds were fresh, very fresh, still heavily bleeding and horrible to look at.

"No!", he screamed, attempting to charge at Mullendore. "Ah, ah, ah!", Jaylon yelled behind him, causing Lucas to stop immediately. Mullendore gave him a nightmarish grin, worse than anything he had ever seen. "I told you what I would do, right?", he growled and reached at his belt, pulling out a long dagger. He slowly moved it towards her face, slightly touching her left eyebrow with it. She shivered in fear, in pain and in humiliation, desperately looking at Lucas for help.

"When we came here, we only saw the runt climbing out of her window into the backalley. I ordered one of my men to follow him, but he just vanished in the backalleys of Oldtown without a trace", Mullendore explained. "So I gave her a chance to tell me where I could find Dairon. I gave her a chance to prove her innocence. She spat me in the face, called me a bastard and some other things that weren't nice, so I stopped treating her like a lady"

"Please...", Lunett mumbled weakly without even looking at Lucas. "I just want to go home" Mullendore gave her a sadistic grin and violently stomped onto her lower left leg, applying pressure onto the fresh wound and causing her to cry out in pain. "Honey, you won't go anywhere ever again", he growled.

"Enough!", Lucas shouted at him. "Enough! Leave her be!" He was trembling in anger, in shock, in desperation, looking from Mullendore, to Lunett to the place where her feet should have been. "What do you want? I give you everything!", he pleaded him.

Mullendore gave him a pleased smirk. "Of course you will", he growled, holding the dagger at Lunett's left eye. "First you're going to tell me where I can find the boy, this Dairon" Lucas closed his eyes, thinking about what Butterfly would do to the boy should he ever get his hands on him. "Don't do it!", Lunett yelled at him with the last bit of power left in her body, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Don't do it...", she mumbled again and Mullendore narrowed his eyes. "Should have taken your tongue, you little bitch", he snarled and moved the dagger downwards, cutting right through her left eye, causing a deep gash on the left side of her face. Lunett started to howl in pain, a sound that froze the blood in Lucas' veins and broke his heart.

"Next order!", the beast yelled and small drips of saliva flew out of his mouth as he raised his voice. "Drop your sword!" Despite the pain she was in, Lunett slightly managed to shake her head. "Don't...", she pleaded him. "He will..." She was silenced as Mullendore pointed the dagger at her remaining eye.

"Drop your weapon and I will give her mercy", Mullendore said in a suddenly calm voice. "It does not matter if you trust me or not, because I promise you, by my honour as a knight, by the old gods and the new, keep your sword pointed at me for another second and you both will regret it" He applied pressure on the dagger, slightly cutting Lunett's eyebrow, causing her to let out a surprised scream. Lucas was barely able to see her behind his desperate tears, as he looked down at his sword. He looked back at Lunett, at his wonderful Lunett, broken, beaten, destroyed by the monster that was holding her, that was still threatening her. And he realized that he had no options left. "Don't!", Lunett yelled, but it wasn't clear if she was talking to Lucas or to Mullendore. And Lucas dropped his sword. The weapon almost sank to the ground, it appeared slower to him than usual. The sound of the steel hitting the wooden ground was muffled and for a moment he was only able to look at the blade lying on the ground.

Lunett's panicked screams snapped him out of his thoughts again and as he looked up, he nearly sank to the ground himself. Mullendore had embedded the dagger in her remaining eye, blinding her and causing her to helplessly flail around with her arms. She managed to hit Mullendore on the upper arm, but the false knight barely seemed to notice it. "Please...", Lucas mumbled. "Please... mercy..."

Mullendore gave him another spine-chilling grin, the grin of a demon, before slightly shrugging. "Sure!", he yelled over the sound of Lunett's agonizing wailing. "Small gifts preserve the friendship after all" With these words he embedded the dagger deeply into Lunett's skull, cutting off her screams and immediately causing her body to grow limp.

As the monster looked back at him, he narrowed his eyes. "What?", Mullendore asked. "What? That was mercy!" He slightly raised his hands with a sick smile, letting go of Lunett's dead body. She sank to the ground, the dagger still deeply embedded into her eye. And Lucas realized that he had lost everything. That he had no chance. That the only thing he was still able to do was to deliver justice. "Don't do anything stupid, boy", Mullendore growled as he realized the look on Lucas' face, the look of a good man who had been pushed too far.

In a swift movement, Lucas turned around, faster than Jaylon could fire. His fist hit the ugly man in the face, causing him to move his crossbow upwards. The bolt flew above Lucas' head, hitting the wooden ceiling of the room, while Jaylon went to the ground, more out of surprise than out of actual pain. And then, Lucas darted towards Mullendore, jumping over Lunett's dead body and grabbing her killer by the throat, sending both of them to the ground. He indeed managed to pull him down, much to Mullendore's surprise. His fist hit him in the face, once, twice, thrice and he put both hands around the man's throat, starting to choke the life out of his treacherous, lying body.

Lucas did not count, he barely realized what he was doing, but it seemed to be a long time until something heavy hit his side, pressing the air out of his lungs. Someone, Jaylon, pulled him away from Mullendore, onto the ground and a heavy boot hit him in the face, again and again, until he was barely conscious anymore.

"Enough!", Mullendore's hoarse voice sounded and Lucas was barely able to see him rising from the ground, painfully holding his throat. "I still need him!" He let out a cough and shivered in pain. "That was a mistake, you little bastard", he growled, and looked up as heavy boots were heard from the door.

Lucas followed his stare and saw two men entering the room. The first was Leonard, looking pale, holding his waist. Blood flew out between his fingers and he looked as if he was about to faint. Behind him, Samuel Harrington entered the room, holding his own sword and Leonard's, slightly kicking the other knight into the ankles to cause him to continue walking.

Leonard only needed a moment to realize what was happening. His stare went from the downed Lucas, to Lunett, to Maron Mullendore and he sank to the ground. "No... no... no!", he muttered. "No, not you! NO! NO!" His voice got louder, until he was almost yelling, lying on the ground in sheer desperation.

"I ordered you to kill him", Jaylon snarled, and Samuel looked at Lunett's dead body with clear disgust. "You don't give me orders, you little dog", he answered with a dangerously low voice and Mullendore slightly clapped his hands. "Good work, Samuel!", he complimented him. "Is he going to survive this?" Samuel gave him a slight nod. "If I wanted him dead, he would be dead by now. Tough as nails, that one. Fight would have been different if he would have been wearing armour. But he is going to live, if you want to"

Mullendore gave him a nod. "For now", he answered, as Lucas fought to stay conscious.

"Why...", Leonard mumbled from the ground with a weak, broken voice. "Why are you doing this?" Mullendore let out a cold chuckle, followed by a violent cough. "Excellent question, Ser Leonard", he complimented him and stepped over Lucas' bruised body.

"You see, for decades I tried to save this city from the people that were oppressing it, tried to save its citizens, the good and pleasant citizens of Oldtown. I lost more than you could imagine and made no progress at all", he explained. "And then, one day I finally realized it. You can't defeat the sickness that holds Oldtown in its grip without giving the criminals something to fear. And so I gave them Butterfly"

He turned around again, facing Lucas, his grin showing a sick pleasure. "I suppose I always had it in me. A love for violence... it came only natural for me, but I was also able to do a good work with it. I made progress like you can't imagine. One by one, I cured this city. The only one who proved resilient was the Burned Man" He stopped and coughed again, holding his throat for a moment. "Up until now... if my plans worked, the cripple's men have killed one of my men, assuming him to be Butterfly by now. This will cause the Burned Man to grow careless and ultimately, carelessness will get him killed. After all, the only one left to oppose him in this city is the humble, honest, Ser Maron Mullendore, a man as dumb as a horse, who can't even read his own letters..."

He burst into malicious laughter. "Priceless! But my plans go further than you can imagine and for that I need Dairon and Robert Raylan's last will", he explained while he was still chuckling. "Samuel, Jaylon!", he snarled and his men stood attention. "Make the knights ready for their journey to the cells. I have a few questions for them", he ordered. "Yes, Butterfly!", Jaylon answered, earning himself an angry glare from Mullendore.

"Butterfly is dead", the false knight explained gleefully. "Butterfly is dead and the Burned Man will soon follow. This city will finally be at peace" His eyes looked at Lucas, who was slowly sinking into merciful unconsciousness. "And all will be well..."

End of Chapter 4: Butterfly

Your Choices

Alliance: Lucas chose to ally with neither Archmaester Quent nor Maron Mullendore

Friendship: Kersea told Alysanne that she considers her a friend

Morality: Marak told Noelle that he has no problems with killing a child

Strategy: Richard decided to support Urid's plan

Justice: Jaron decided to allow Harpy to kill 'Butterfly'

Next time on Forum of Thrones:

"You fucked up, boy", Mullendore said with a sickening smile. "All of your friends are dead. Even your little girl, just because you chose to oppose me. Now you're all alone. And you will answer my questions" He looked at the knife in his hands and his smile widened. "The fuck I'm going to do!", Lucas spat at him and Mullendore closed his eyes. "Trust me, you will, sooner or later. For your own interest, tell me what I need to know. If you hope for help, you are ridiculous. No one is looking for you. No one even knows you're here..."

"I don't like this...", Sasha mumbled, looking down the alleyway. "What do you mean?", Samantha asked, putting a hand on the hilt of her hatchet. Butterfly's blood was still there. For some reason it felt less satisfying than it should have. "It's too silent in here", Sasha explained. "That's one of Oldtown's nicest taverns over there. Normally there should be music and laughter and..." She stopped, her eyes wide opened as she grabbed Samantha at the shoulders, quickly pulling her into an adjacent house entrance. "Fuck...", she mumbled. "Stay down..."

Torvin looked up at the man who could have been a Hoare. Dark hair, dark eyes and an even darker heart, a smile like the Stranger himself, a kinslayer and aside from Harren Hoare the only man in Harrenhal who managed to genuinely scare him. "Lord Captain Greyjoy", he said respectfully, slightly lowering his head. He was below this man, in more than one way and he was not afraid to admit it. "Captain Breaker", Damon Greyjoy answered with his soft voice. "You're awfully late. Do you prefer to stroll around the countryside with our *revered* princelings?"

Ilish shivered as she took a look over her shoulder. There was nothing to be seen, nothing to be afraid of, right? She knew these streets for years now. This was Raylansfair. There was nothing to be scared about!

She turned around, nearly bumping into the man standing in front of her. Even though she tried to suppress it, a small scream found its way out of her throat. She remembered him. It was the man from earlier, the one who hid his face under this ridiculously large hat! "What do you want?", she yelled at him, before hearing the footsteps behind her. She nearly jumped up as she heard the voice right behind her, the deep, growling voice, oozing of violence, of a thirst for blood. "Hello, Katya", Wolfius Woodbark said.

"Hello, Arthur", the man in front of him said with a polite smile, while Arthur grabbed his sword. "What are you doing here?", he demanded to know and the man raised his hands. "Easy, Arthur. We mean no trouble", he promised and pointed at himself and then at the woman next to him, the one who still mustered Arthur with a mixture of sadness and anger. "My name is Ellyrio Terys. The lovely lady next to me is my business partner Briar", the man introduced them and the woman gave him a cold glare. "I believe we have a similar interest in this city. From what I've heard there is a killer running on the loose, am I correct?"

The man jumped up from his chair and started to walk towards her. Jenna saw that he wasn't taller than herself and almost as skinny. His brown hair was cut short and he had a bony face. Still, his smile was extraordinarily charming and as he reached her he took an elegant bow and blew her a kiss on the hand. "It is always a pleasure to meet the servants!", he proclaimed, looking from a surprised Jenna to a frowning Harris. "Ah, but where are my manners?" He quickly put a hand onto his forehead and chuckled. "My name is Lord Hobert of Mander's Mouth", he introduced himself. "I am here to claim my inheritance"

"So, this is it?", Harren Hoare asked, his dark eyes staring at Tully without moving. The Riverlord resisted the stare and gave him a determined nod. "Yes", he answered. "This is it" Garthor's heart started to beat faster as he looked from George to Torvin. He was holding onto his crossbow and prayed to every god he remembered that Harlan wouldn't notice the weapon. He had no doubt that Harren had seen it though. Why was he so calm? Was he accepting his death like this? Unlikely...

"There would be one more thing I'd like to talk about, Lord Tully...", Harren growled with a cruel smile.

Forum of Thrones, Act II, Chapter II: The Iron Price; Coming Soon!

Act II: Shattered and Broken

Chapter II: The Iron Price

Samantha

Samantha had seen a lot of death in her life. The slaughtered bodies of her family, they would haunt her dreams forever. The sight and especially the smell of a thousand charred corpses on the fields of Tyrosh, where Aegon Targaryen's dragons had burned the Volantene army, she would never forget it. The screams of Butterfly, as that girl castrated him... for the first time in her life, Samantha dearly hoped that she would never get an image out of her head. For the past five years she had dreamed of this moment. Of course, she had always hoped that she would be the one to kill him, but watching it had been just as satisfying. Still... it left a sour taste in her mouth. There was one question she couldn't get out of her head as she was walking through the streets of Oldtown, through a city that was finally free of Butterfly. What now? This had been her life for the past five years. Now that it was over, what was left for her?

"Lunett", she mumbled to herself. Lunett was the next step. Getting her out of this city, with or without help from Lucas and Leonard. Then? Who knew... She could return to Gutten. He had always been good to her. Or she could return to Pentos. Or... no, not the North. Too many bad memories. A smile flashed over her face, to suppress any hint of sadness. In some way Samantha was looking forward for a life finally free of Butterfly.

She arrived at the inn minutes later. At least a part of her would have liked to stay with the other mercenaries. Martin had promised a victory feast and Samantha had always liked feasts. But there were more important things waiting for her. Lunett was all that mattered now.

Sasha was sitting at a different table, drinking a different wine, but the look she gave Samantha as she approached was still the same. "You're back. Any success with Butterfly?", she stated with a monotone voice and Samantha gave her an enthusiastic nod. "He's dead", she answered. "And he had to suffer before it happened..." Sasha raised her hand, finally looking up from the table. "No details please. I'm sure it was gruesome, or else you wouldn't grin like that. I can sleep better without imagining the details" Samantha gave her a nod. "Noted", she answered. "You found anything out?"

Sasha let out a sigh. "Had to ask a few of my contacts. Had to talk to a few people I wouldn't even look at otherwise. But yes, I found something out. Your girl, she's at the Blind Helmsman", the woman answered and waited for a moment. She sighed as she noticed Samantha's still confused look. "Soldier's inn. Bunch of arrogant pricks", she explained. "Not that far from here. We can be there in thirty minutes"

With a grin, Samantha slid her a golden coin. "The first of many!", she promised. Sasha quickly grabbed the coin and her cup, filled with wine. To Samantha's surprise, she raised it and smirked slightly. "To a good partnership", she proclaimed, emptying it in a single gulp. "These knights, any idea how they will react?"

Samantha shrugged and gave Sasha a sign to follow her outside. "Lead the way", she ordered her and Sasha started to walk down the street, Samantha walking next to her. It was evening, the sun was currently hiding behind the Hightower. Gloomy twilight filled the streets and the air was mercifully cold. "Truth is, I don't know how they will react and, frankly, I couldn't care less. I won't leave them a choice. They had no right to take her without her father's conscience", she answered.

Sasha slightly shook her head. "I disagree", she answered. "The girl's wishes are more important. But perhaps it wasn't clever of them to just, you know, take her without any kind of explanation. What are you going to do if they won't let her go?"

Samantha thought about this for a moment. "I'd talk", she answered. "I was always good at talking" Sasha chuckled as she heard this. "Yeah, I can see that", she answered with a mocking voice. "I mean, would you be ready to fight them if necessary? If they absolutely refuse to let her go?"

"I don't know", Samantha answered. "I hope it won't come that far. Do you know how to fight a knight?" Sasha shook her head. "Give me a horse and I would mow them down. One reason why I hate this city. But in a fair fight? My arakh is not meant to cut through plate armour. What about your tiny axes?", she asked.

"Well, they won't wear their armour all the time, right? Perhaps we can surprise them", Samantha said and Sasha gave her a nod. "Without the armour, they won't stand a chance. But I'd like you to succeed with your talking. There has to be a better way than to kill them", the woman muttered.

Samantha gave her a nod. "I agree", she answered. "Not too keen on killing them, but if they don't give me a choice, I'm ready" Sasha seemed to be satisfied by this answer. "Sounds good to me. We'll see soon. Just down that alleyway here..."

All of a sudden, she stopped, putting both hands on the hilt of her arakh. "I don't like this...", she mumbled, looking down the alleyway. "What do you mean?", Samantha asked, putting a hand on the hilt of her hatchet. Butterfly's blood was still there. For some reason it felt less satisfying than it should have. "It's too silent in here", Sasha explained. "That's one of Oldtown's nicest taverns over there. Normally there should be music and laughter and..." She stopped, her eyes wide opened as she grabbed Samantha at the shoulders, quickly pulling her into an adjacent house entrance. "Fuck...", she mumbled. "Stay down..."

"What.. what is it?", Samantha demanded to know in confusion and Sasha leant forward, looking out of the entrance, narrowing her eyes. "City guard. More than a dozen and... Fuck!", she exclaimed, quickly pulling back. "See for yourself..."

Samantha leant forwards, looking down the alleyway, while trying her best not to be seen. From an adjacent street, a contingent of city guards entered the alleyway, slowly walking towards the

inn. Their leader was a tall man, probably in his late thirties, with a clean-shaven, plain-looking face and short, dark-brown hair.

"You know that one?", Samantha asked and Sasha gave her a slightly irritating look before nodding hesitantly. "Farris Flowers, captain of the guard. One of Mullendore's butchers...", she answered and let out a frustrated sigh. "Speaking of the devil"

As Samantha looked back to the tavern, she saw a man walking out of it. His walk was slightly off and he was trailing his left leg, hinting at some sort of old wound. He was slightly overweight, but tall, taller than any of his guards, with red hair that already started to grey. His clean-shaven face had probably been handsome twenty years ago, but it was clear that he hadn't aged well.

"Maron Mullendore", Sasha explained. "Commander of the City Guard, praised leader and veteran of many battles" Samantha raised an eyebrow as she heard the annoyed tone in Sasha's voice. "You don't like him?", she asked and the other woman gave her a nod. "Have worked for him for a short time, since he's the best option if you don't want to work for the Burned Man or Butterfly. Dumb as an ox, but very talented at surviving pretty much everything. Talked to him once and I hated the way he looked at me. And then there are the rumours..."

"Rumours?", Samantha asked and Sasha's face gave her disgust away. "He has a brutal streak. Some would call him 'cruel'. Has a history of beating up whores. Of course, he gets away with it, who would ever dare to call him out on it? And that... that makes me furious", she answered.

"And if he is here, something bad happened in that building. I'm willing to be my horse that it has something to do with your knights"

Samantha gave her a worried nod. "I'm not betting against that. That many guards... that can't be a coincidence", she answered and narrowed her eyes as she saw more people walking out of the building. "What the fuck...", she mumbled.

The first to walk out of the door was Leonard Constantine. The knight looked paler than she remembered him, holding his waist, his hands bound in iron. He looked as if he was about to faint any moment. Even from the distance, Samantha could see the desperate look on his face. Behind him walked Jaylon Gordus, now wearing armour similar to the one worn by the city guard. And behind him, two guards carried a clearly unconscious Lucas Flowers out of the tavern, his face battered and bruised.

"Since when is Jaylon Gordus a member of the city guard?", Samantha asked and Sasha shrugged. "Don't know. He's a sleazy opportunist. Wouldn't be too surprised if he works for Butterfly and Mullendore", she answered. "Those are your knights, right?" Samantha barely looked at her, but gave her a nod, as she clenched her fists. That was not good. That was not good at all. Both, Lucas and Leonard had signs of a fight. And Lunett was nowhere to be seen... "Commander Mullendore!", the leader of the newly arrived guards said as he immediately stood attention. "I didn't know you were here too" Mullendore gave him a short nod and a pleased

smile. "Captain Farris, just at the right time", he said with a hoarse voice, starting to cough as he pressed these words out. "There has been..."

He burst into a violent cough, looking at Jaylon for help. "Commander Mullendore was called here while on patrol duty. He was under the impression that it was only a small disturbance, but as soon as he got here, he found himself pitted against Samuel Harrington himself. Luckily, me and my men were nearby", the man explained. "As soon as Samuel noticed that he was badly outnumbered, he fled the scenery, leaving these two behind"

"Who are they?", Captain Farris asked, raising an eyebrow as he looked at Leonard. The wounded knight attempted to take a step forwards, but Jaylon immediately held him back. "Don't believe them!", Leonard shouted. "He is Butterfly! He did this!" Jaylon silenced him by violently hitting him on the back of his head, causing a bit of laughter from the surrounding guards.

Samantha on the other hand had her eyes widely opened, her fists clenched up to the point where it hurt. Butterfly was dead, she had seen him die! What madness had befallen the knight that he was claiming such things?

"They worked with Harrington. Probably hedge knights in service of Butterfly, for what we know. Tricked me into believing them and lured me into a trap", Mullendore explained. "And what they did to that girl..." He shuddered and Samantha nearly froze in terror. What they did to that girl... She closed her eyes, clenching her teeth in anger. If they did anything to Lunett...

Mullendore's facial expression told her everything she needed to know. The knight was shaken by what he had seen inside of the tavern. And he looked like a man who wasn't easily shaken by a disturbing sight. Captain Farris seemed to understand too. He gave his commander a nod, as a sign that he needed no further explanation, looking at the knights with an angry expression on his face. "What shall happen to them?", he asked with clear disgust in his voice.

"We're separating them, interrogating them in separate locations. The unconscious one will go with me, to the Hightower. The loudmouth will go with Captain Jaylon, to Robett's Gate", Mullendore explained. "In the meantime, I want you and your men to search the tavern. The Fang did good work from what we have seen. No survivors. But he had to flee in a hurry, so perhaps he left some evidence behind. Close the inn off, search it thoroughly. And get a cart for the corpses"

With these words, Commander Mullendore started to leave, four men following him, two of them carrying an unconscious Lucas. Captain Farris and Jaylon saluted, before glaring at each other for a short moment. Jaylon turned around, walking down the alleyway in the opposite direction, behind him to men who had grabbed Leonard at the shoulders, dragging him with them. For a moment, Samantha feared that Jaylon would walk past them, possibly seeing them, but he took a turn and walked through an adjacent alleyway, leaving them behind.

"So...", Sasha mumbled. "That does not sound good" Samantha shot her a desperate glare and shook her head. "Not at all...", she answered. "What Constantine said... about Mullendore being Butterfly"

Sasha frowned as she heard this and slightly shook her head. "You told me you saw him dying", she mumbled, but narrowed her eyes. "That's just impossible. Mullendore as Butterfly? True, both are disgusting human beings, but that does not mean that they are the same person, right?" She looked at Samantha, slightly curious. "So, what are you going to do now?", she asked.

Samantha noticed that she had still clenched her fists, up to the point where opening them again almost caused her pain. "I need to get inside of that tavern. I need to find out what happened to Lunett", she hissed and for a short moment, Sasha gave her a concerned look.

"Are you sure? You might not like what you find"

"Doesn't matter", Samantha answered. "I have to know. And then we're going after the knights. I will ask them a few questions and seven hells await them if they don't answer" Despite her current state of mind, or perhaps because of it, she couldn't resist a slight smirk. "You know a way into that tavern?"

For a moment, Sasha hesitated to answer. A moment too long. Samantha gave her an inquisitive look and grabbed her at the shoulders. "Sasha, please. I need your help here", she urged her and the other woman let out a sigh. "Farris Flowers", she answered and pointed at the group. "The captain over there, the one who just walked out of the building. Owes me a favour" Her gaze hardened as she looked back at Samantha. "If you make me use that favour, I expect a reward later"

"Twenty golden hands", Samantha offered and Sasha shook her head. "Thirty", she answered. "Twenty-five", Samantha tried again. "Thirty-five", Sasha answered and Samantha let out a sigh. "Fine, thirty", she agreed and Sasha gave her a smirk. "A pleasure to do business with you", she chuckled and stepped out of the house entrance, pulling Samantha with her.

As they walked up to the city guard, the men gave them questioning, perhaps almost hostile glares. A worrying number of them had their hands on their sword, some of them even presented their steel. The captain wasn't among them, albeit his glare was the least friendly, especially once he saw Sasha. She looked similarly displeased, but managed to give him an almost polite nod. "Farris", she greeted him shortly. He narrowed his eyes. "Captain Farris", he answered and Sasha let out a sigh. "Captain Farris", she tried again and this time the hint of a smile flashed across the man's face. "Sasha", he greeted her. "What do you want?"

Sasha looked from him to Samantha, an almost apologetic look on her face as she seemed to be at a loss of words for a moment. "What can I say... me and my... companion, Samantha, we really need to have a look inside of that building", she managed to explain and Farris face

dropped. "No way", he growled shortly, but sighed as Sasha started to smirk at him. "I really don't want to reveal it here... you know... but... You remember the docks?", she asked.

Farris pressed his lips together as he looked from Sasha to Samantha. "I remember them. And I remember that I saved your life almost as often as you saved mine on that day", he answered.

"Almost' being the key word", Sasha answered coldly. "Just a quick look. Samantha needs to check something out. She's not working for Butterfly, you know you can trust me with this"

The captain gave her a reluctant nod. "I know", he answered and sighed in defeat, but still gave her a sharp glare. "Don't you ever mention the fucking docks again!" With these words he turned around, giving Sasha and Samantha a handwave to follow him.

"It's fine, they belong to me", he explained to a guardsmen who stood right in front of the tavern door. The man gave him a short nod and stood attention as Samantha and Sasha walked past Captain Farris, into the inn. No... into the slaughterhouse.

From the moment she entered the taproom, she knew that Lunett had little to no chances of survival. An older man was lying on the ground, but safe for his grey hair, Samantha wasn't able to identify any remarkable features. Or any features at all. He had clearly tried to crawl away from something, as the large trail of blood behind him indicated. His killer had stabbed him in the belly, but what killed him was the blow that cleanly carved his face in half.

"What are you looking for, if I may ask?", Farris asked. Samantha gulped as she looked from the corpse to the guardsman. "A young girl. Eighteen years old. Light brown hair. Green dress", she explained. "The daughter of a friend", she added and saw her worst fears confirmed as Farris' face darkened. "There is one... are you sure you want to see it?", he asked and she gave him a nod. "I have to be sure", she answered sullenly. Out of habit, she attempted to smile, so that he wouldn't notice the gloomy look in her eyes, but this time she failed even at a basic smirk.

Farris let out a sigh and continued his way, Samantha and Sasha following closely. He lead them up a set of stairs and through a narrow hallway. "Perhaps your girl wasn't here as it happened. Perhaps she is still alive", Farris explained in a weak attempt at consoling her. Both knew that it was a lie.

Samantha didn't even manage to enter the room. She took a look through the door and that was enough to force her on her knees. Lunett was lying on the ground and her feet... her eyes... The dagger shoved through her chin must have been a mercy kill... Seven Hells, this was worse than a thousand faceless bodies on the fields of Tyrosh. This was her small northern farm all over again!

And before she even realized it, tears were flowing down her face. Not tears of sadness. She never cried out of sadness. Her tears indicated rage, the same rage she felt as she fought against Butterfly. Whoever did this... Samantha would make sure that they would suffer, more than Butterfly ever did. If she would ever find them... Desperately sobbing, she sat on the

ground, looking at Lunett's disfigured face. She barely noticed that Captain Farris had taken respectful distance, allowing her some time alone. And Sasha was crouching next to her, apparently unsure what she should do.

"Listen... Samantha... I'm sorry..." she mumbled and looked away as Samantha shot her an angry glare. "You're sorry..." she hissed. "Fuck your sorry! That girl is dead and her killer walks around freely!"

"Perhaps not", Sasha interjected. "The knights..." "Are innocent!", Samantha finished her sentence. "They are responsible for bringing her here, but this... I don't know either of them very well, but they are knights for a reason, fucking self-righteous honourable stupid knights!"

She noticed that she had shouted the last sentence, loud enough for Captain Farris to hear it.

"What are you going to do now?", Sasha asked. "I'm going after them, they know what happened", Samantha answered. "Flowers is brought to the Hightower. Constantine to... whatever Robett's Gate is"

"City guard outpost", Sasha explained. "Located at the old city wall. Look... I know some shortcuts, to the Hightower and to the Gate. We can be at the Hightower before Mullendore arrives, we can be at the Gate before Jaylon arrives. If you want to get one of them out of there, you have the best chances to strike before they come close to the actual building. But you need to make a choice now. Keep in mind that Jaylon has less men with him, if things escalate"

[Go after Mullendore and Lucas] [Go after Jaylon and Leonard]

Torvin

They entered Harrenhal through it's southern and smaller gate. Even now in the darkness, Torvin felt watched by the castles huge towers, like giants who were judging him. And even now, people were working on the fifth tower. It would be finished soon and Harrenhal would be completed. But if the Drowned God had mercy, Harren Hoare wouldn't be around to see it. Harlan was oddly silent, but this silence only made him more dangerous. During the past hours, Torvin got a pretty good impression on him. The prince was boisterous, surprisingly friendly while he was talking. And he loved to talk and to shout. But when he wasn't talking, he was brooding. There was a lot of anger and hatred inside of him and it became apparent by the looks he gave everything around him every time he was silent.

Right now, Harlan was looking at Alys Boleyn, his stare twisted, nearly murderous. Torvin had to smirk as he thought about the situation. It had been a decision in the heat of the moment when he found her in the forest. He could have given her to Harlan, he could have changed

everything. Instead, he showed mercy, not because he was pitying her, but because he wouldn't be Harlan Hoare's dog. And he wasn't regretting it. A noble girl from the North! Who would have thought that?

And then there were her companions. Torvin paid little attention to the mercenaries. He barely remembered their names. But Anturion... He never heard about Edward Anturion before, but for some reason, Gabin and even Harlan acted unfailingly polite around him. In turn, Anturion acted the same towards them. He had been chivalrous, offering his horse to Alys, he had been gentle when helping her onto it, but something in the way he spoke, something in the way he smiled made Torvin wary around this man.

"There it is, my friends!", Harlan proclaimed and the dark look in his eyes faded. "Welcome in Harrenhal!" He patted Anturion on the back and the man answered with a friendly smile. "Thank you, Prince Harlan, for your kindness"

Harlan gave him a generous grin. "Ah, don't mention it", he said. "I'll send word to my father. If he wishes, he will welcome you personally" With these words he gave Gabin a short nod.

"Gabin, escort Ser Edward and his entourage to the Great Hall. Make sure to bring them a hot meal and a stiff drink!"

Gabin gave him a nod and looked from him to Hjalgar. "Hjalgar, perhaps you'd like to accompany me?", he asked and the young man gave him a surprised look. "Me?", he asked and looked at Harlan. The prince's smile looked almost benign and if it weren't for his eyes, Torvin could have mistaken him for a completely different man. And that was what made Harlan Hoare so dangerous. "Go ahead, my friend. If you want to help Gabin, why not?", he said. "It's late either way. I plan to call it an early night, so you're all free to do whatever you want to"

With these words, Harlan took an elegant bow in front of Anturion and another one in front of Alys, who had descended from her horse. "Good night, Ser Edward. Good night Lady Alys", he said and gave Alys a light kiss on the hand. "Keep your friends close, mylady. Harrenhal is not a good place for a young girl"

Before she could answer anything, Harlan turned around, starting to walk towards the King's tower, where Harren and his sons had their rooms. Perhaps it was for the better. Torvin had seen the look in Lady Alys' eyes and he knew that Harlan's mood could swing easily if he was mocked in the slightest. The dark night soon caused Harlan to vanish, but his aura remained with them, cold, threatening, dangerous.

"What are you going to do now, Torvin?", Gabin asked and Torvin looked towards the westernmost of the five towers. They had no names, at least no official ones, but this one was known as the Pyke tower, the tower where the Iron Fleet captains met. "Lord Captain Greyjoy asked for me a few hours ago, before we left for the hunt", he said with a hint of regret. The Lord Captain wasn't a man who liked to wait.

"And you chose to make him wait?", Gabin asked, raising an eyebrow. "That was a bold decision. I mean, I never met Damon Greyjoy before, but if he is any bit like his sister..." "He is worse", Torvin cut him off. "I always found that it was easier to get along with Kyra" Gabin sighed and slightly shook his head. "And now he's here. May the gods have mercy" Torvin gave him a nod. "Indeed...", he mumbled.

Gabin looked at Anturion and his entourage, who waited politely in the distance. He patted Torvin on the back and slightly smirked. "I'm not envying you right now. Have fun with the Lord Captain. But as soon as you're done, meet me and Hjalgar in the Great Hall"

Torvin gave him a grin and looked towards Hjalgar. "See you soon", he said and turned around, leaving his companions behind. He never had much to do with Damon Greyjoy before. Of course, as the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, he gave orders, but while he was among the highest of nobles, Torvin was no nobleman at all. Half of the Iron Islands nobility had dark rumours surrounding them, but the stories about Damon made even him shiver. He was a kinslayer by accident, cursed by the Drowned God after he killed his younger brother with a throwing axe while playing the Finger Dance when he was only fourteen. He was banished from the kingdom after nearly killing Harndon Hoare, the king's thirdborn son at the age of nineteen. Torvin knew, Harndon probably deserved it, but the sheer audacity Damon showed by beating him to a bloody pulp in bright daylight, it still baffled him. In his exile, he was rumoured to have sailed to the other end of the world, up to Asshai and beyond. And thirteen years later he returned, successfully pleaded forgiveness and was even appointed as the new Lord Captain, after his predecessor, the old Lord Harlaw, decided to retire peacefully. His success proved that it was a good decision to give him the position, but Torvin never really trusted this man.

As he walked up the narrow set of stairs that lead up to the Pyke tower's main door, he saw movement near a window next to it, a figure stepping out of the door. Lord Captain Damon Greyjoy, known as the Ghost of Pyke, gave him a slight nod as a greeting. Like most of his ancestors, his hair was dark, while his skin was eerily pale. His face was handsome, in a rugged way, with sharp facial features and a rather prominent nose. A short well-groomed beard covered his chin and mouth and his dark brown eyes looked almost amused.

Torvin looked up at the man who could have been a Hoare. Dark hair, dark eyes and an even darker heart, a smile like the Stranger himself, a kinslayer and aside from Harren Hoare the only man in Harrenhal who managed to genuinely scare him. "Lord Captain Greyjoy", he said respectfully, slightly lowering his head. He was below this man, in more than one way and he was not afraid to admit it. "Captain Breaker", Damon Greyjoy answered with his soft voice. "You're awfully late. Do you prefer to stroll around the countryside with our *revered* princelings?" Torvin gave him an apologizing look and Damon answered with a pearly white smile. "It's fine, Captain Breaker, don't get irritated by my questions", he said as Torvin approached him. He

even gave him a warm handshake, paired with a polite smile that failed to reach his eyes. "I'm sorry, Lord Captain", Torvin said sincerely.

"Don't be sorry, Captain. I'm sure it was exciting to see how Prince Harmund showed the smallfolk where they belong", Damon answered mockingly and looked Torvin straight in the eye. Torvin couldn't stand this inquisitive stare and concentrated on a spot above the Lord Captain's head. "Besides, the meeting is not over yet. The captains Stallhart, Vessels and Hollard are still present. You just missed a lot of trouble and some uneasy situations over the course of the evening"

With these words, Damon turned around, entering the tower. Torvin followed closely. "There has been trouble?", he asked and Damon gave him a slight nod. "Some of the captains weren't pleased with the roles I had prepared for them in the next step of the war. Fortunately, it was nothing my sister couldn't handle"

"Has there been death?", Torvin asked and Damon shook his head. "Sadly not. It was just the usual boring brawl. I believe Tristan Botlin lost an eye in the attempt of stabbing me", he answered and his mouth formed a smirk. "I haven't really paid attention to what happened afterwards, but two men were necessary to stop Kyra from killing the man"

Torvin chuckled as he had to imagine Kyra Greyjoy beating up Tristan Botlin. Damon's younger sister was over a whole foot shorter than Botlin and had probably only a third of his weight. Nonetheless, as enjoyable as this picture was, it wasn't hard to imagine. What Kyra lacked in strength, she made up for in fierceness and ferocity. Botlin should have known better. "Your sister will accompany our meeting?", he asked and Damon gave him a nod. "Someone has to prevent a hundred hot-headed raiders from killing each other after all. And who would be better suited than the captain of Harren's guard?"

Torvin had to agree to this. Captain of the guard... on some days Torvin was surprised that a man as rooted in tradition as Harren Hoare was willing to give such a position to a woman. Then again, no one deserved it more than Kyra Greyjoy, who had already clashed swords with the lord of Bear Island at the age of fifteen. Besides, even Torvin's limited understanding of politics were enough to see that it had been a necessary manoeuvre to bind the Greyjoy's closer to the crown again after the events that led to Damon's exile.

Damon stopped in front of the large, double-winged door that led to the Iron Fleet's war room. Loud, agitated voices were heard. A woman's bright laughter could clearly be singled out. Damon raised his hand. "One moment, Captain Breaker", he whispered with a low voice and an amused look in his eyes, as he pointed at the door. "Let's hear what they talk about, shall we?" "I fail to see why that upstart cunt Codd gets the Crag!", a loud, harsh voice shouted. Torvin knew the man who was talking. Simon Vessels, captain of the Solitude, father of Harmund Hoare's best friend Rell. Compared to Rell, he was especially obnoxious, a foul-mouthed son of

a whore. "Because Codd has actual experience when it comes to raiding, unlike your son", a soft, female voice answered. Alynne Hollard, the only woman among Harren's captains. Technically, she was a Riverlady, born to House Hollard, but she had been drowned and reborn as a servant of the Drowned God, just like every man in Harren's army. Unlike most of his soldiers, Alynne had taken this route out of her own free will. Torvin knew, the Lord Captain appreciated her calculating advice.

"Watch your tongue!", Simon shouted and Damon chuckled slightly. "You haven't gotten any role at all in our future war, if I'm not mistaken" "Just like your son", Alynne stated as an answer. The sound of someone jumping up, knocking a chair over in the process, was heard, as well as the sound of steel being drawn. "Careful where you point that thing, Simon", another female voice said. Torvin recognized Kyra Greyjoy, the young Kraken of Pyke and a genuine smile flashed over Damon's face. "You surely don't know how to handle such a long sword"

"You'd do better not to talk to me, bitch", Simon growled. Damon narrowed his eyes and a dangerous look appeared in them. He took a step forwards, pushing both door wings open in the process, cutting off every talk inside of the room.

The war room was nearly empty. Only four people sat inside of it, each of them looking at Damon. The air reeked of alcohol and smoke, but the fire inside of the fireplace was nearly burnt down. Large windows were supposed to catch the light, but in the darkness that surrounded Harrenhal at night, a large chandelier, formed like a stylized kraken, was the only way to illuminate the large room. Over a hundred empty chairs were located in a half circle around the large table in the middle. Right now, the only people in the room had gathered around the table.

Simon Vessels was usually a tanned man, but right now he was as pale as a ghost. His light brown hair was cut extremely short and the large, ugly scar across his right eye was shivering as he was looking at Damon. His mouth was slightly opened and with very slow movements, he started to put his longsword back into its sheath. Simon was barely seen without his armour, a mixture of brown leather and chainmail, with a broad fur collar.

Across him sat Captain Alynne Hollard, the youngest person in the room. Her blonde hair was cut short and her dark blue eyes pierced from Simon to the Lord Captain. As usual, she wasn't smiling, instead she was slightly frowning.

Between them sat the third captain of the Iron Fleet present, Captain Durren Stallhart. His long brown hair was unkempt, as well as his beard, giving him a wild appearance. His large nose had been broken one too many times, pale scars crossing all over his visible body, contrasting well with his tanned skin. His feet rested on the table and he made no attempts of putting them down as Damon Greyjoy slowly entered the room. Instead, he had a huge, gleeful grin on his face as he gave Torvin a nod and Simon a triumphant look.

Leaning against the window, smiling brightly at the sight of her brother, stood Kyra Greyjoy, quite fittingly known as the Laughing Kraken. She had the dark blue eyes that were commonly found with her house, as well as the eerily pale skin, the dark brown hair and the physical beauty the Greyjoy's were known for. She was at least two heads shorter than Torvin and had to wield the large bearded axe she currently rested her arms on with both hands, even though it was intended to be wielded with one. Of course, she was never seen without her mail armour, but it wasn't too hard to imagine her in a fine dress. Or without any clothes at all.

"Ah, brother", she greeted Damon and gave Torvin a nod as well. "And Captain Breaker finally found his way to us as well. You had a tough hunt, Captain?" Torvin slightly shook his head. "A waste of time", he admitted. "Should have attended the meeting instead"

"You should have", Damon agreed and looked at Kyra again, who gave Simon a triumphant glare. "You just arrived at a good time, brother", Kyra said and gleefully watched how Simon's face dropped. "Simon here just said something very interesting"

Simon Vessels frantically shook his head and somehow managed to lose even more colour on his face as Damon slowly approached. "It's... it's nothing, Lord Captain!", he swore. "I'm just curious why Rell got no assignment today. I mean, he is one of Harmund Hoare's closest associates, he is a good fighter and he proved his cunning more than once. My son is ready, he only needs a chance!" As he talked, he clearly started to get more agitated. "Even that fucking upstart Lucifer Codd got an assignment for the coming war. The coast of the Crag is a huge target for a dim-witted cunt like him", he said and Damon raised an eyebrow, putting Simon off his stride. "I mean... I mean... not like he would not deserve an assignment. But... not that big!"

"And with these last three words, my friends, Captain Vessels summarized his physical attributes quite well", Kyra mocked him, earning herself a cold glare from Simon. Damon ignored her remark, but as he saw that Simon opened his mouth again, he cut him off. "I can assure you, your son will get an important role in the war, the chance he ever dreamt off, as soon as a few other matters are dealt with", he said and Vessels looked surprised, as well as pleased. Before he could answer anything, Damon continued to speak. "Was that all, Captain Vessels? You said nothing else?"

Torvin knew that Simon Vessels was not a fool. He knew, Damon listened to their conversation. Still, he gave Kyra a pleading look as he shook his head. "That was all, Lord Captain", he promised. Damon looked at Kyra who gave him an affirmative nod. "Nothing else, brother. Captain Vessels had been awfully and unusually polite, even articulate today. Not a single insult came out of his mouth"

With her words, the matter was settled and Torvin knew how close Simon had avoided to get into real trouble. The older captain gave the young woman a thankful look, which she answered with a forgiving smile.

“Now that we dealt with this, we need to talk about Breaker's role in the coming war”, Damon whispered, his voice very low as he was still looking at Simon. “Over the past few hours, we have assigned six dozen captains to the coming war. Some, like Captain Hollard here, will have a passive role in our next step...” “I'm still honoured to serve”, Alynne interjected, causing Damon to give her a pearly-white smile, like a polite shark. “Indeed you are, Captain Hollard”, he whispered. “Others, like Captain Stallhart here, got tremendously important roles” Durren Stallhart gave him a short nod and slightly put his feet into a more comfortable position as he leant forwards. “Aye”, he growled. “The northern coast of the Rock” He grinned proudly at Torvin. “All of it, boy. A hundred miles, filled with villages, filled with riches and women for me and my men!”

“You forgot the sheep”, Kyra interjected, which caused Durren to burst into roaring laughter. “Aye, Laughing Kraken's right. I forgot the sheep. Hard to distinguish them from the rocky girls over there”, he answered and heavily tapped his chest. “But Durren Stallhart never backed out from anything. The villagers of the rock better hide their girls *and* their sheep when they see my sails!”

He and Kyra grinned at each other and Damon let out a slight sigh. “I'm sure all the sheep in the Rock shiver in fear when they think of you”, he said. “But back to the topic. Captain Breaker, you are one of the Iron Fleet's lowest captains, your ship one of it's smallest” He looked at his sister, to prevent any attempt of hers to say something. “And to answer my sisters unspoken remark: Sadly, size matters when it comes to warships. Because of this, you won't get a target of your own. Instead, I have prepared two possible assignments for you, one promising you a small fortune of loot, the other one promising you glory and fame”, he explained, glaring at Kyra, who raised both hands. “Hey, you brought the warships up, not me”, she defended herself.

Damon ignored his sister's remark and looked back at Torvin. “I'm going to let you choose. The first assignment would put you under my command, while we raid Lannisport in the earlier stages of the war and with a bit of luck, lay siege to Casterly Rock itself during the later stages. Of course, the treasure is going to be shared between you and a hundred other captains, but you could climb high in the king's favour”, he explained and his eyes pierced through Torvin. “If you want to climb high in his favour, of course”, he added with a dangerous tone in his voice. “The second assignment would put you together with Captain Stallhart here. The coasts of the northern Rock are rich, richer than one might imagine, but scarcely guarded. And it would be all for you and Durren here, every village, every small castle and every town between the Ironman's Bay and Banefort. Of course, that one won't be as prestigious as the other one, but the material reward will be sizeable”

Before Torvin could answer, Durren patted him on the back. "What do you say, boy? You and me on an adventure? Like in the good old days?", he asked with a grin. Damon said nothing, but folded his hands together, awaiting Torvin's decision.

[Choose to raid the northern Rock with Durren Stallhart]

Maya

With a big grin on his face, Gregar put four mugs of ale onto the table, passing one to Maya, Christian and Ser Aldrik, while keeping the final one for himself. For a moment, Irving looked at him, before frowning. "Hey, you forgot one!", he moaned and Gregar shook his head. "I already can't stand you when you're sober. Now imagine how obnoxious you become as soon as you drink alcohol", he explained and Irving gave him an angry glare.

Maya took a sip of her ale, slightly grimacing at the watery, stale flavour. She looked at Irving for a moment, before passing her mug over to him. He raised his head, giving her a surprised look. "Wait... what are you doing?", he asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Maya saw that Aldrik came to the same conclusion regarding the ale. A smile flashed over her face. "What does it look like? It's a gift", she answered. Irving slightly shook his head, but couldn't resist to give Gregar a triumphant grin, before taking a sip of the ale. Almost immediately, he put it back down onto the table again, giving Maya a shocked stare. "That tastes terrible!", he exclaimed. "Take it back!" Maya shook her head with a grin. "No way, Irving. I'm not drinking that", she said gleefully.

Gregar burst into a chuckle as he continued to drink his own ale. "Clever girl", he complimented Maya, before looking at Christian. "That really the best ale you have in your city?", he asked. The ranger gave him an apologetic nod. "You get used to it", he promised. "After a while you barely notice the subtle hint of piss in it"

"Knightfang likes it", Ser Aldrik interjected, pointing at his wolf, who was enthusiastically drinking the knight's ale, spilling at least half of it onto the floor. The presence of the large animal was enough to shoo away any patron near them and even those who were brave enough to stay relatively close to them still gave it a slightly scared look.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?", Irving asked, but he still continued to drink the ale. "Next time you give me a present, don't give me that ale", he moaned towards Maya. She and Gregar exchanged a look and Maya subtly shook her head. Gregar let out a sigh in return, before taking a deep gulp from his mug. "Seven Hells, what do you put inside of these?", he asked.

Christian gave him an elusive grin, before shrugging. "Some things are better left unanswered, Gregar", he explained and Gregar gave him a nod. "Aye", he agreed. "But it's not the worst I ever drank. Back home in Redfort, my favourite inn once tried to serve me actual goat piss to

make me pay some drinking debts. Only noticed it when the wench started to laugh after serving me the fifth mug”

“That doesn't surprise me”, Irving remarked sullenly, as he took a disgusted sip from Maya's ale. Gregar gave him a short glare, but before he could answer anything, Aldrik patted him on the back. “Easy, Gregar. Don't get angry at him”, he said calmly.

Maya smiled as she watched the two arguing. It had been a good choice to allow Ser Aldrik to accompany her. He had been a much needed part of her group as a counterpat to Gregar and Irving, as well as quite probably the sole reason Gregar hadn't just punched Irving on several occasions.

“So, Ambassador Iresons, what are your plans now?”, Christian asked, looking at her with his warm brown eyes. Maya gave him a short smirk, as she noticed Gregar and Aldrik arguing. “The acting lord will probably be pleased to meet us”, she answered and Christian shook his head. “Lord Harris will question Lord Royce's reason to send you here. Don't expect a lot of hospitality from him”, he answered.

“You don't like him?”, Maya asked, raising an eyebrow. Christian let out a sigh, before slightly shaking his head. “Don't get me wrong, Lord Harris is not a bad man and I have no personal quarrel with him. But I don't think he is the one who's best suited for this job”

“What do you mean?”, Maya asked, but before Christian could answer, Maya noticed something behind him. A young man, wearing light mail armour, who slowly approached them. He looked mainly at Ser Aldrik's wolf, while the animal decidedly ignored him, continuing to drink the knight's ale. Christian followed her stare, looking over his shoulder and straight at the young man. A friendly smile flashed over his face as he raised his hand. Visibly uncomfortable, the man walked closer and nearly took a jump back as the wolf looked up from his mug and gave him a bored look.

“Ch... Christian Thom... Thomas?”, the man asked stuttering, eyeing the wolf. His face got pale as Knightfang yawned and presented his sharp teeth. Christian gave him a nod and folded his arms, awaiting the man's answer. “We... we heard you're back in the city”, he explained.

“Commander Na... Nathamer demands your presence. There has been an attack near the forest”

Christian narrowed his eyes as he heard this. “What kind of attack?”, he asked and the young man looked at the large wolf without saying a word. The ranger let out a sigh. “Alright then. Ambassador Iresons, I'm afraid I can't accompany you to your meeting”, he said slowly. “If this is about what I think it is, I have to investigate”

He raised from his chair, turned around and took an elegant bow in front of Maya. “It has been an honour to escort you to Raylansfair. Unfortunately, the commander of the city guard needs my help”, he explained and took a second bow in front of Ser Aldrik. Gregar even stood up and

gave him a brief handshake, while Irving continued to glare at his ale, completely ignoring the ranger.

Maya gave him a curious look. "What exactly do you have to do, Christian?", she asked. The ranger let out a sigh and looked uncertain for a moment. "There have been attacks near the city. Something large killed two farmers a week ago. And two days later, a young girl was torn to pieces at the edge of the forest", he explained. "That was my main reason for scouting the greater area. We have the occasional wolf attack on our lands, and there are bears living deeper into the forest, but these are shy animals who rarely attack unless provoked. This time, something large decided to relocate it's hunting grounds to the farmlands and the closer forest area. I have no idea what it is, but it's intelligent enough to avoid capture, it's large enough to kill a grown man without much of a fight and it's hellishly dangerous"

This time, Irving actually looked up from his ale, giving the ranger a questioning look.

"Dangerous for me?", he asked. Christian shook his head. "Not as long as you stay near capable fighters, such as Ser Aldrik here", he tried to reassure him. Instead, Irving's frown got even bigger. "Oh, great", he moaned, clearly displeased about the answer. "That's just great" Christian smirked at this remark, while Ser Aldrik shook his head. The ranger gave Maya and her companions a last nod, before turning around and started to walk out of the tavern, accompanied by a clearly relieved young guard.

"And there goes our way straight to the acting lord", Gregar muttered. "He would have made things easier" "Too easy", Irving interjected. "When things seem to be easy, there's always something terrible happening, sooner or later to even the odds again"

"You're a philosopher now, Irving?", Maya asked and immediately felt a sting of regret flashing through her, as she thought about what might have happened to Dimitri, back in that forest. Now that she learned about some large animal hunting humans in that forest, the old hermit's survival seemed increasingly unlikely.

To her surprise, Irving seemed to notice her sad expression and had enough courtesy to ignore her remark. It was Ser Aldrik who broke the uncomfortable silence. "Now that Christian is gone, we need someone else to announce you to the acting lord, to make a good first impression", he stated. "Your mission is highly important to the Vale of Arryn, so that first impression could be essential in our plans"

"And what if we fail to give a good first impression?", Irving asked. "Just saying, cause I know we're going to fail. Your wolf is probably going to piss on the floor or something like that"

Knightfang heard this and raised his fangs, letting out a low growl. Irving immediately raised his hands apologetically. "Okay, okay. You can probably behave in a castle. But what's about Gregar?", he asked.

Gregar gave Maya a short glare. "One word, Maya", he pleaded. "Please, just allow it" She shook her head again, looking at Ser Aldrik instead. "If we fail to win the acting lord over, we need to break into the archive", she proclaimed, causing the knight to raise an eyebrow. "You have any experience with burglary, Ambassador?", he asked.

"Not really", she admitted. "But this is a city. A small one, sure, but every city has it's scum. We just need to look for it" "That will be my job", Gregar proclaimed. "I know how to spot a thief and I know how to talk to them. Leave it to me and you'll get the best damn thief this city has to offer"

Maya gave him a relieved smile. At least she had an alternative plan, in case the lord would refuse to help them. But one question remained. Ser Aldrik was right, they needed to make a good first impression. The inn could probably provide her with a bath and she would send Irving to buy fine clothes from the local tailor. But there was one matter she needed to talk about.

"When I enter the lords hall, one of you needs to announce me, to give a more impressive first impression", she explained to her companions and Ser Aldrik gave her a nod. "As this groups only knight, I will gladly take this job. I have experience with these kind of things", he offered. Maya was inclined to agree with him, before Gregar shook his head. "Speak for yourself, wolf", he growled. "I'm with her the longest. And unlike you I have never used her as a pawn in the bronze lords games" He looked back at Maya and gave her a friendly smile. "Clearly this honour should be mine, Maya"

Irving shook his head as Maya looked at him for a moment. "Oh no, I'm not offering anything. I'm terrible at these things and I don't want to do it. Let Gregar the Barbarian or Ser Wolf here take the questionable honour, but leave me out of this", he said quickly. "Besides, you can't force me"

[Allow Ser Aldrik to announce you]

Ellena

"So, have you ever looked into it?", Jarek asked, as she looked absent-mindedly at the letter. In the past night she laid awake, wondering if she had made the right decision. What if that man was telling the truth when he claimed to be a friend of Terroma? What if her refusal to hand over that letter would have consequences for her friend?

Jarek gave her a worried look and she let out a sigh, putting the letter back into her pocket. The mercenary was sitting in front of her, a game of dice between them. He arrived in the early morning, together with three companions and at first, Ellena had shunned them. They were working for the Burned Man after all and a pure necessity, only here to protect the ship. She wanted as little to do with them as possible and at first, the Burned Man's mercenaries proved themselves to be just as expected. But quickly, Jarek proved himself to be different.

Optically, he did not look the part of a brutal thug. He was handsome, in a rough way, with dark blonde hair and green eyes. There was a small scar above his left eye, narrowly missing it, as well as a second, rather gruesome looking one at his neck. A short stubble beard covered his chin and his smile was genuinely warm and friendly. It only took him a few hours of making light-hearted jokes until Ellena started to like him. And now in the late afternoon, they were trying to pass the time with games, as well as trying their best to endure the muggy heat that came with the southern wind.

She shook her head at his question. "Haven't opened it so far", she remarked. "I mean, it's intended for Terroma" Jarek shrugged at her remark. "But you are curious, admit it", he grinned. Ellena gave him a playfully annoyed look. "Are you trying to tempt me into spying after a good friend, Jarek?", she asked with a grin. Jarek looked around in an exaggerated manner, before enthusiastically nodding. The goofy way he moved caused Ellena to chuckle. "No chance", she stated.

"Oh come on, m'lady", Jarek moaned and she raised an eyebrow. "My friend, I get the impression that you are the curious one", she answered and he gave her a slight nod. "Of course I am. I mean, why wouldn't I? How often do I get the chance to learn some of the Burned Man's secrets?", he explained, urging her to open the letter again. "Not today", Ellena remarked with a smirk and Jarek lowered his head in defeat. "Valar Dohaeris", he answered, but he was still smiling.

Ellena looked up as she heard the sound of footsteps coming closer. She turned around to face Talea, who supported her father. The captain was noticeably pale from the loss of blood, his hand heavily bandaged. Talea's face was anything but pale, a huge and ugly bruise covering her entire right cheek, where Samuel Harrington had knocked her unconscious. But her smile made more than up for it, an overjoyed grin as she looked from Jarek to the other mercenaries, who were patrolling over the deck. Even the captain seemed to be pleased, a light smile being visible under his bushy brown beard. The change this smile had on his whole appearance caused him to look a lot less intimidating towards Ellena than he did before.

"I had to see them myself", he exclaimed in joy. "These men, they are only here thanks to you, am I right?" Ellena gave him a short nod and he took a step closer towards her. He opened his arms in an attempt of hugging her, but quickly put them down again, looking a bit awkwardly at his freshly bandaged hand.

"How is your hand?", Ellena asked politely, a wide smile on her face. The captain let out a sigh, looking at Talea, who gave her father a reassuring nod. "Could be better", he revealed. "The wound stopped bleeding, I can move my fingers, but the healer said I might never regain a strong grip"

"You're alive", Talea interjected "That's all that matters" Her gaze got a bit more worried as she looked from Ellena to Jarek. "Ellena, can I talk to you in private for a moment?", she asked, looking at the captain. "Father, why don't you talk to the charming man here for a moment?" "Charming, mylady?", Jarek asked with a bright smile. Talea seemed to blush, which was hard to see under the bruises, while the captain's smile vanished. "I will", he snarled. Ellena gave Talea a curious look, as the captain's daughter turned around, walking below the deck again. Ellena followed her quickly. Below the deck, Talea stopped in front of the room that belonged to Jaron over the past week. She gave Ellena a worried glare and grabbed her at the shoulders. "Ellena, can you tell me what you had to do to ensure our protection?", she asked with a worried tone in her voice. "These men... I mean, the one you talked to seems nice, but the others... I don't know if I feel safe with them around"

"Safer than without them", Ellena remarked. "Or do you want Samuel and Jaylon to return?" Talea frowned at the mention of Samuel and slightly shook her head. "No... no, of course not. Still, have you agreed to do anything for this Burned Man to ensure his help?", she asked. Ellena slightly shook her head, before pulling out the letter. "He asked me to bring this letter to Terroma. Said it had important information for him", she explained. "And that was it? Nothing else?", Talea asked, looking slightly less worried. Ellena gave her a nod and the captain's daughter let out a sigh. "You had a lot of luck, little lady. People like him... I don't trust them. They never give you something for free"

The Burned Man did, Ellena knew it. He basically gave her the protection she needed for free. But she stayed silent, to avoid an argument with Talea. "Do you intend on bringing it to him?", Talea asked. "The letter I mean. To Terroma"

Ellena thought about this for a moment. Last time she attempted to find Terroma, she only found this shady man. Samuel Puffer. And she had Martin with her, who at least provided a bit of protection. Perhaps she could ask Jarek for help this time. Then again, she wasn't even sure if she wanted to deliver this letter. "I don't know yet", she answered truthfully and Talea seemed to be pleased. "Don't do it. Men like this Burned Man, they start by asking small favours and in the end they demand everything from you. I know how fuckers like him do their business", she snarled, before patting her on the back. "We should go up again. I don't have the opinion that my father and this man up there get along very well"

"His name is Jarek", Ellena explained and grinned as Talea gave her a confused look. "He's nice, isn't he?" The captain's daughter frowned at these words and shrugged a bit too quickly. "If you say so", she said and Ellena had to chuckle. "What? Why are you laughing? It's nice that he is nice. I mean, that you two get along"

They arrived at the upper deck, where the captain just turned around from Jarek, an angry expression on his face. He walked towards his daughter, grabbing her with his unwounded

hand. "We need to talk about these men, Talea", he growled, but gave Ellena a kind nod. "Keep an eye on that one", he said, not-so-subtly pointing at Jarek, who watched the scenery with a friendly smile on his face.

"You can count on me!", Ellena promised and walked towards the mercenary, while the captain and Talea walked down the stairs. Jarek gave her a slight grin. "So, you and that other girl...", he started and Ellena cut him off. "Her name is Talea and she is very nice", she explained and Jarek gave her a short nod. "Talea, very nice, noted", he said quickly. "Have you talked about me and my men?"

Ellena shook her head. "About the Burned Man in general. Talea does not trust him", she explained and Jarek gave her a nod. "Sounds like a smart girl. I don't trust him either", he answered, before quickly raising both hands. "Before you ask, I work for him because he pays good and he is better than Butterfly, in my opinion even better than Mullendore. He is not as ruthless as he likes to appear" He looked towards Ellena's pocket. "Anyway, back to our earlier topic, shall we? You know, before we got interrupted by the very nice Talea and her not-so-nice father"

"You mean that letter?", Ellena asked. "No chance. I'm not going to open that. It's for Terroma" Jarek's grin got a bit wider. "But you have to admit that you are curious, right? This Terroma, it appears he has a secret. A secret the Burned Man knows. A secret the Burned Man does not want you to know. You have to admit that you are burning with curiosity, am I right?"

Ellena looked at him for a moment, before both burst into laughter. "Gods, that one was terrible", Ellena remarked and Jarek gave her an apologetic nod. "But technically, it was the truth, m'lady. You really want to find out what he wrote, what could be that important", he explained and Ellena knew that he was right.

"Why do you care so much?", she asked. Jarek gave her a conspirational smile. "As I said, I don't really trust him either. He is better than the other people of power in this city, but that does not mean much. And I'd love to learn more about his plans as well", he explained. "But hey, you know what, if you don't want me to know it, say one word and I will leave you alone with that letter. I know you want to find out what he wrote just as badly as I want"

[Open the letter, but send Jarek away first]

Arthur

"Bite marks on her neck...", Arthur began, but was cut off by his father. "What's left of her neck", the commander growled. "Bite marks on what's left of her neck", Arthur corrected himself, while writing down the gruesome sight in front of him. "Chest torn open, intestines shred to pieces. Left arm ripped off slightly below the shoulder, missing..." "Not missing", Commander Hackor interrupted him again. "It's lying ten feet down the road. Deep bite marks, but the beast did not

try to eat it", he corrected his son with visible annoyance. He let out a sigh, grabbing the parchment. "Show me what you've written, boy", he said and started to read. Arthur concentrated on his father, with his once chestnut hair, now greying and receding, the large scar above his eyebrow, his green iron armour, his stern eyes of the same colour, looking disappointed as they looked most times.

"Three misspellings", his father growled. "And I can't read that word" He pointed at it and Arthur narrowed his eyes. "Intestines", he explained and his father gave him a nod. "I see", he remarked shortly. "What else do we know about her?", Arthur asked, in hopes of getting an answer. Commander Hackor looked around, to the half dozen guards who were patrolling the closer area, to the farm in the distance and to the man, staring at the ground a few feet away from them, his gaze apathetically, tears running down his face. He was a few years older than Arthur, a bit shorter, but bulkier, with dark brown hair and a long beard.

"Her son", the commander explained. "Her name was Millie, the man over there is Roman. Gave us no last name and I won't ask for it, not while he is like that. She was sixty years old and lived on that farm over there, together with him. That's all we learned from him"

Arthur gave him a nod, still trying to avoid looking at the corpse. Of course, this woman wasn't the first dead body he had seen. While mostly a peaceful town, Raylansfair had an occasional case of murder. However, they were mostly made in the heat of the moment, without any method behind them. Jealous wives who stab their husbands, escalating quarrels at the local tavern. The occasional animal attack, of course... But this was different. Clearly, it had been an animal, but Arthur had no idea what kind of beast could do this. The fact that it attacked so close to Raylansfair concerned him. Roman's farm was located three miles out, one of the closest to the town. Arthur had never seen any large animal coming that close to the city, not even starving wolves in the winter.

"So we know nothing", he summarized and his father gave him a nod. "Correctly. But I hope that this will change soon", he answered and pointed at a figure in the distance. "Christian Thomas, one of our rangers. The best we have. After the last attack, he was looking for the beast in the deeper forest. And after this attack, I sent for him. Perhaps he can tell us more"

Soon, the figure revealed himself to be a young man, a few years younger than Arthur. He had fair skin and dark hair, with a short beard of the same colour. His face was marked by a life in the wilderness, a bit rugged, making him appear older than he truly was. His youthful brown eyes gave him away. As soon as he got a look on the body, his face got a dark expression and he let out a sigh.

"Commander Nathamer", he greeted Arthur's father with a nod. Hackor returned the nod and pointed at Arthur. "My son Arthur. Arthur, this is Christian Thomas", he introduced them. Arthur

shook the rangers hand and was surprised by how cold it felt. The man was clearly shaken by the sight and Hackor noticed it too.

"So, what can you tell us?", he asked. Christian knelt down, looking at the body, especially at the bite marks. "That was no wolf", he said immediately. "You see these bite marks at the neck? Their jaws don't grow big enough to cause these wounds. And the arm... cleanly ripped off" His voice was slightly shaking as he was inspecting the gruesome wound. "An ordinary wolf would have needed quite a while to rip it off like that. Whatever it was, it was stronger. Far stronger" "A bear then?", Hackor asked. Christian shook his head. "Bears have the strength, true. But when they attack, they mainly use their paws. A single blow from a bear would have been enough to end her life. Whatever attacked her mainly used it's jaws, but these wounds here...", he explained and pointed at the belly. "They were created by claws, by sharp claws, but they have been smaller than a bears claws. No, a bear would have created even more gruesome wounds, aside from the fact that bears don't behave like that when they attack"

"And have you uncovered any leads during your hunt?", Hackor asked, visibly uncomfortable with what he just learned. A feral bear, or perhaps a pack of starving wolves, that would have been bad, but manageable. Three years ago, half a dozen guardsmen chased a pack of wolves away after they attacked a merchant. And a year ago, ten guardsmen killed a starving bear who was seen near Harking's farm. But there were no other predators in these forests. This was the Reach after all. A few wolves, deers, the occasional bear, that was all they had to offer when it came to large animals.

Christian shook his head. "No leads, no good ones at least. I found a dead deer, half eaten. Maybe it was killed by our creature, maybe it was killed by a bear. Was hard to say. But it was clever enough to give me no real leads and that's what concerned me the most", he answered. "Perhaps a direwolf?", Arthur asked, earning himself another disapproving look from his father. Christian seemed to think about this for a moment, but shook his head. "There are no direwolves in the Reach", he answered and shook his head. "No wild ones at least, not here. Or south of the Neck in general. I've heard about a small pack in the Wolfswood between Winterfell and Deepwood Motte and there are rumours about sightings near the Last Hearth. But there are perhaps thirty, maybe fourty direwolves left south of the Wall. It would fit the size though, albeit it would still be an especially large specimen"

He looked towards the distance, where Raylansfair was located behind the trees. "A hedge knight in service of the ambassador of the Vale has a young direwolf with him. Not much bigger than a regular wolf. As tame as such a beast can be", he explained and Hackor gave him a startled look. "The Vale sent an ambassador?", he asked. "Why wasn't I informed about this?" Christian gave him a short look. "You have been informed now", he stated dryly. "Besides, there are more important things right now. Like the beast that preys on your citizens" Hackor gave him

a short nod. "Of course", he agreed. "So, it's no wolf, no bear and no direwolf. Do you have any idea what it could be?"

To Arthur's surprise, Christian gave him a nod. "Still a bit far fetched, but it could be a shadowcat. One of the older, larger and meaner ones. Would explain the intelligence, the strength and the way this woman was wounded", he explained and Hackor gave him an alarmed look. "And why do we have a shadowcat here?", he asked.

"That's a good question, commander. The Mountains of the Moon are closer than the Wolfswood. It's not impossible for a single specimen to travel all the way through the Riverlands and the Reach to find better hunting grounds here. They have a taste for human flesh"

"But she wasn't eaten", Arthur remarked and for once, his father gave him a proud look as Christian appeared to be surprised for once. "Fuck...", he mumbled. "You're right. A few bits of flesh missing, mainly at the neck, but she wasn't eaten" He slightly touched the dead woman's wounds. "That changes a lot. Could still be a shadowcat. They have a cruel streak. But it means that this is an exceptionally intelligent specimen" He looked up, from Hackor to Arthur. "The only reason it could have for killing humans without eating them would be that it is intelligent enough to enjoy it"

"Great...", Hackor remarked. "So, we have a highly intelligent predator out there, strong enough to kill bears, a beast that hunts our people for fun?" Christian gave him a nod. "Sadly, that sounds right", he remarked without a hint of irony. He looked past Arthur, at the still weeping man. "A relative?", he asked. Hackor gave him a nod. "Her son", he explained and looked at Arthur. "Arthur, give me a moment alone with Christian, will you?"

Arthur quickly saluted in front of his father, his commanding officer. Hackor seemed to be pleased by this and gave his son a light nod. "There are a number of tasks you could do. Someone needs to inform the castle about what happened. If Christian is right, then we need help. We don't have enough men to spare for a hunt, not with the serial killer running around in the city. Tell Lord Harris, at least ten of his guards are needed", he explained and pointed at Roman. "Alternatively, you could talk to him, console him and find out more about our victim here. I can send everyone to the castle, but you're the best I have when it comes to consoling people. I'm going to let you choose"

Arthur knew, he wasn't good at consoling a grieving person. He had only ever consoled one person, his sister, right after their mother died six years ago. And considering how she turned out, he did a terrible job. Of course, his father paid too little attention to her to see it. But perhaps he was still the one best suited for this job. Then again, he knew that they also needed the help from the castle.

[Go to the castle and ask for help]

Alys

The great hall was the largest she had ever seen. Her father's tiny keep up in the North would fit in it entirely, including the courtyard. It's ceiling was at least a hundred feet above her, two galleries finding their place between it and the floor. Several dozens of hearths were located in it, albeit most of them were cold and dead at this time of the night, causing the huge hall to be chilly. Thanks to Edward's cloak she was still warm, but she could see that this did not apply to him.

"Are you shivering?", she asked him and he quickly shook his head. "It's a bit cold, mylady, but ever since I've sailed through the frozen bay of Ib, a chilly breeze like this can't bother me. Keep the cloak, you need it more"

She gave him an affectionate smile and looked around. One of Harlan's hounds, Gabin, was starting a fire in one of the fireplaces closer to the throne. The other one, Hjalgar, was about to bring them a hot bowl of soup. Just as she thought about this, she noticed her stomach rumbling. The last time she had eaten something... Seven Hells, she had been without food for a whole day now! As soon as the lanky man put a steaming bowl of soup in front of her, she started to eat. Only a moment later, she noticed that this was a bad idea, as she noticed the heat and tears started to appear in her eyes. Carvin noticed her facial expression and started to chuckle. "Careful", he warned her with a smirk. She shot him an angry glare, which in turn only caused him to grin even more. Still, her hunger won over the pain the hot soup caused her and she soon continued eating, much to Carvin's delight.

Instead of directing any further remark at her, the mercenary instead looked at Hjalgar, who just carried the last two bowls, for Edward and Alisa respectively. "So, you're the best damn archer Harren's little princeling has ever seen?", he asked sceptically and the young man stopped in his tracks. "... I suppose yes", he answered and his gaze hardened a little bit. "What's it to you?" "He has little experience with archery, hasn't he?", Carvin continued and Edward gave him a cold glare. "Carvin, you're out of line", he growled. The mercenary ignored him and continued to look at Hjalgar. The young Ironborn looked slightly at a loss of words, shyly looking to the ground, as if he tried to avoid any confrontation. "Well, why don't you prove it. You. Me. Archery contest. Tomorrow", Carvin offered.

"There won't be enough time for that", Edward remarked, causing Alys to give him a curious look. "We won't stay in Harrenhal for a long time", Edward explained to her. "Just until I've finished my deal with the king. Afterwards, we're going to meet up with another ally of mine here in the Riverlands"

"And when will you bring me to Dorne?", Alys asked with a bit of suspicion in her voice. Her distrust was clearly audible and it sent a flash of guilt through her body. Edward obviously noticed it, but he politely ignored it. "I have dealings with a small city in the western Reach.

Afterwards, I have to meet up with King Blacksails at the Stepstones again. I could drop you at Sunspire if you want", he explained and gave her a friendly smile. "I intend to make good on my promise, Lady Alys. By my honour, I will make sure that you reach Dorne"

Alys let out a relieved sigh. "I can't wait for it", she revealed. "I hate this place" Edward gave her an approving nod, but before he could answer, a new voice sounded, deep, pleasant and compelling. "And you have every right to hate it"

Alys and Edward looked up immediately in surprise, looking towards the nearest door. A young man had walked into the room. He was tall, well-built, with a handsome, clean-shaven face. His hair was black and cut short, while his eyes had nearly the same colour, giving him an intimidating look. Despite this, he sounded friendly and his smile was surprisingly warm as he walked closer. Edward raised from his chair immediately and took an elegant bow in front of him, prompting Alys to slowly raise from her chair as well.

"It is an honour, Prince...", Edward started and gave the man a short look. "Harrick Hoare", he introduced himself and gave him a similarly polite bow. "Prince Harrick Hoare, the king's youngest son"

Hoare! Alys froze immediately, stopping any attempt to bow. Of course, it would be polite, but screw politeness! That man's brother tried to hunt her through the forest only a few hours ago and even not-so-subtly threatened her all the way back to Harrenhal. She would not bow in front of him!

Harrick noticed her reluctance and instead surprised her by kneeling down in front of her. "My apologies, my lady, for what my brother did. I was informed about Harlan's actions and I can ensure you that neither me, nor my father had any knowledge about his plans", he promised and his voice got a bit lower, similar to his brothers, more dangerous, more angry, albeit the anger did not seem to be directed at her. "And neither do we approve of it. Father will have a stern talk with him and with our eldest brother, Harmund, as soon as he returned from his... his 'hunt'"

He raised from the ground again, looking at her with a stern, but honest look in his eyes. "All I can say for now is that I am deeply sorry for what happened to you. I know my apology means nothing to you, but it's heartfelt. I can understand that you must hate this castle and all of its inhabitants now"

As surprised as she was about this gesture of kindness from a Hoare, she managed to shake her head. "I don't hate this castle", she tried to reassure him. "It was just something said in the heat of the moment" Harrick slightly smirked at her remark. "Like my brothers, Lady Alys, I am good at spotting a lie. Unlike my brothers, I bear you no ill will for it"

"Prince Harrick, with all due respect, but weren't we supposed to meet up with the king? The business I have with him is important and personal", Edward interjected and Harrick gave him a

short Hoare-glare. "And nothing to discuss with a fourthborn son, am I right?", he snarled. His angry glare quickly vanished, followed by a genuinely friendly smile as he noticed Edward's slightly nervous facial expression. "Ah, that expression on your face. Relax, Anturion. I am not offended by whatever you meant to imply", he chuckled, turning around and leaving a baffled Edward behind. "My father is awaiting you in his audience room and he does not like to wait. I must warn you that he is not in a good mood today, so choose your words carefully", he said as he gave them a handwave to follow him. Edward, Alys, Carvin and Alisa started to follow him, just as Gabin finally managed to ignite the fire in the hearth.

"Did he just...", Edward stuttered and Alys gave him a grin. "Made fun of you? Looks like it", she chuckled. "I like him. For a Hoare, I mean" "Have I mentioned that I have a good sense of hearing, mylady?", Harrick spoke as he looked over his shoulder. He and Alys exchanged a short grin. Oh yes, she already felt better. This man was not as bad as his brother. And perhaps this place was not as bad as it seemed!

"One more thing we should talk about...", Edward said, albeit he lowered his voice to avoid getting heard by Harrick. "What do you know about Harren Hoare?", he asked. "Nothing good", Alys answered and Edward gave her a nod. "Exactly. I know you have a quick wit and a... let's call it loose tongue. Harren will not approve of this. In fact, it would be better if you pretend to be someone you're not while you are in his presence. Pretend to be a timid and scared little girl, avoid to look him in the eyes and he won't see you as a target"

"I disagree", Alisa remarked from behind them. Edward and Alys looked over their shoulders, facing the woman. "You know what kind of man he is, right? He is Ironborn. Even worse, he is the King of the Isles and the Rivers. He likes nothing more than to destroy something weak, something innocent, especially when it is scared of him. On the other hand, he respects strength more than anything. From what I've heard, Harren is willing to allow women in high positions in his army. The captain of his guard is a woman for example, she proved her worth by fighting Worland Mormont to a draw at age fifteen"

"Yeah, about that... Big news, I didn't", Alys remarked quickly. Alisa gave her a nod. "You didn't. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't act strong and confident when meeting him. Don't show your fear. If Harren the Black sees you as meek and innocent, like Edward just suggested, he will destroy you", she urged her. Edward shook his head. "I disagree, Alisa. If she acts cocky and fearless, like you just suggested, he will be enraged by it. It would be better not to give him any reason to become angry at her"

He stopped talking, just as Harrick stopped in front of a large wooden door. "Interesting conversation you had", the king's son remarked as he looked at Alys. "I suppose you know what's best for you, right?" Before she could answer, he opened the door, revealing the large audience room behind it.

“May I introduce my father, King Harren Hoare of the Black Blood, the Iron King, King of the Isles and the Rivers, King of Salt and Rock, Son of the Sea Wind and Lord Reaper of Orkmont”, Harrick announced his father and stepped aside, allowing Alys to take a look at the man himself. And there he sat. Black Harren Hoare. He was shorter than his sons, with broad shoulders, wearing a heavy black armour. His face was a bit plump, but with sharply defined facial features. Two deep scars ran over his left cheek and crossed his mouth and chin, the lips were pressed together, forming a brutal line. His hair was cut short and it was as black as his name would suggest, despite his advancing age, even though his hairline started to recede. He sat on a large throne, made out of black wood and as he looked up, his horribly dark eyes examined Alys for a moment and the look inside of them was cruel, cruel, cruel...

By the gods, she needed a strategy!

[Act strong and confident]

Drent

A few hours before sundown, far too early in Drent's opinion, the Storm Princess decided to set up a camp for the night, when her soldiers spotted an abandoned tower, watching over a small crossroad. Lady Taniel had protested and tried to insist on moving for a few more hours, but Argella had only given her a cold glare, cutting off every thought of resistance in the other woman. And so, five dozen soldiers spent the next hours preparing a camp, for themselves, but especially for their royal leader. To his surprise, Drent had to give the princess a bit of credit, as she did a good job in coordinating her men. It took only two short hours until a few dozen tents were built around the tower.

“This is a huge load of bullshit”, Garen complained, looking over the camp. The mercenary stood on a small hill, overlooking the camp and Drent had decided to join him. There was little else to do now. A few soldiers were preparing the meal for the evening, but the rest was happy for the opportunity to relax for a while “That's what you get for allowing someone like her to lead a diplomatic mission. We made barely ten miles today before she decided to call for a rest, just because her oh-so-precious royal ass needs some rest”, Garen growled, watching the Storm Princess walking through the camp, accompanied by Lady Taniel, Jax Montclair and Emphryus Dresfel. A sly smile appeared on the mercenaries face “Though it is a precious ass indeed, you can't deny it”

“You're out of line, Garen”, Drent remarked, looking up. In some way, the mercenary had a point, but talking like this was not only dangerous, but almost suicidal. If someone like Ser Emphryus would hear him, he would challenge him to a duel for the princess' honour. Even Drent was annoyed by the continuous disdain Garen displayed towards the princess. She did a far better job than he had thought.

"But I speak the truth and many of the men see it the same way", Garen protested. "Allow someone like Tarel to lead and we would have passed Blackhaven yesterday" Drent raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't change the fact that you are way out of line. I don't have to agree with everything our leaders do, but that does not entitle me to complain about every step they take", he remarked. "Besides why do you feel that Lady Tarel would feel less need to rest her oh-so-precious royal ass?" Garen gave him a short glare. "Because she's nothing like that", he explained with a smile. "Tarel wasn't born in a palace. She's used to march long distances and she's not easily tired"

"How do you know?", Drent asked again and Garen's smile vanished. "Oh, you know. Rumours. Don't know anything for sure, of course", he quickly answered. Drent gave him a short nod. "Of course", he said slowly. The sound of footsteps made both men look over their shoulder. Ser Baron Schodek was slowly approaching them, a stern look on his face. Drent noticed that the old knight was still wearing his armour. In the dusk, his frame appeared to be even huger, his grey beard giving him an almost barbaric appearance.

"Baron", Garen exclaimed in surprise. Drent noticed that the mercenary did not address him formally, but the knight did not comment it. He only gave them a short nod as a greeting. "How long have you been here?", Garen asked and Drent noticed that his eyes had widened. "Long enough, boy", Baron answered with a low voice. "I have told you before not to talk like this about the princess"

The mercenary gave him a frown. "Yeah, I know. It's just...", he started to say, before the knight cut him off again. "It's nothing. Argella Durrandon is a bright young woman and unlike many who came before her, she cares for her people, in her own way at least. She will be our queen one day and she will be a good queen if you give her a chance", Baron scolded the younger man, who avoided to look him in the eyes. "Yes, Baron", he said slowly and the old knight gave him a smile. "Good boy. And now listen. Argella has a good reason to rest here for the night, regardless of how many hours we loose. This place means a lot to her"

"And if it means the world to her, that does not mean...", Garen started to complain, before getting cut off by the knight again. "That does not mean that you have any right to question her decisions like that, Garen", he warned him. "But, alas, I did not approach you to argue. I came to bid my farewell"

"You're leaving us, Ser Baron?", Drent asked. The old knight gave him a nod. "I thought about waiting until dawn, resting for a night, but time is essential on my mission. You will take the western path to Blackhaven and eventually, to Raylansfair. I will continue to walk the northern path, to Rosby and Stokeworth", he explained and let out a sigh. "I fucking hate Rosby" He reached out and gave Garen a fatherly handshake. "You continue to guard the princess. Do your duty", he commanded him, before turning to Drent. His dark eyes pierced through him, but

Drent also saw something warm in them “And you, Golton. I don't know you very well, but what you said to Garen was a good advice. Keep an eye on him for me, will you?”

Drent gave him a nod. “I will. Good luck on your mission, Ser Baron”, he answered. The old knight gave him a disgruntled frown. “For what I care, the lords Rosby and Stokeworth can fight as long as they want. The Storm King does not want to risk a war with Black Harren over it though”, he explained. “Would have been a better idea to send that loudmouth Taniel to deal with them”

He looked down the hill towards the small camp and let out a sigh. “So, this is farewell. Argella already knows it and... ah, she saw us”, he said as the Storm Princess and her entourage started to walk towards them. Drent noticed that Montclair was already walking a saddled horse. The knight looked at Garen for a last time, smiling gruffly at him. “Farewell, boy. Next time I see you, you'll have a fucking medal pinned to your chest”, he said with a grin. The mercenary grinned back, albeit Drent noticed that he looked slightly worried as well. “And you too, Baron. Take care”, he said.

The old knight gave him a nod, before starting to walk down the hill. “You sure about leaving us already, Barry?”, Argella asked with a smirk. Baron gave her an unhappy nod. “If I could stay, I would, dear princess”, he answered. The princess seemed to be slightly upset about this, looking towards the tower. “I hoped you would stay until dawn”, she mumbled, looking far less aloof for a second. She quickly regained her composure and her calm expression. “But I wish you all the luck in the world when talking to Lord Rosby. You'll need it”, she said. “Rosby's are crude and uncultured people as far as I know. I've heard they look like warty pigs and sleep in the dirt”

Baron gave her a nod, accompanied by a grin. “Guess that's why your high father sent me. I'll blend right in”, he said and Argella let out a bright laugh. “You're too hard on yourself, Barry. I'm pretty sure you bathed at some point in the past month...”, she chuckled and took a deep breath. “Correction, at some point in the past year”, she added with a look of feigned disgust on her face.

“As I said, my princess. I'll blend right in”, he said again and the princess gave him a nod. “The best of luck on your journey”, she told him and sounded genuine as she said it. As she turned around, the old knight audibly cleared his throat, causing the princess to turn around. “My dear child, if you don't give me a big hug right now...”

He didn't need to continue, as Argella nearly jumped into his open arms, giving him a peck on the cheek. “That one's for good luck, Barry”, she said, before separating from him. “I hope next time we'll meet you won't act like the pig you look like”

“Ah, your mockery hurts, my princess, but your kisses are warmer than spring”, Baron chuckled as he walked towards his horse. “Listen to your advisors, Argella. You have good men and

women around you” With these words, the old knight started to move his horse, riding slowly past the Storm Princess and her entourage. Argella slightly shrugged as she watched the knight getting smaller in the distance. “I don’t make any promises”, she mumbled, loud enough for Drent to hear.

“But what does it matter for all men must die and I’ve tasted the...”, Garen started to mumbled, before being cut off by Drent. “What? What now?”, the mercenary protested. “The Dornishman’s Wife. Baron quoted it. You don’t like songs, Drentie?”

“I don’t like this particular song”, Drent answered. “And I can imagine that you’ll twist the lyrics a little bit. It’s not the dornishman’s wife you’d like to taste, am I right?” Garen looked away from the Storm Princess, who talked with Lady Tarel and Ser Emphryus in the distance, giving him a confused look. “What... what are you...?”, he asked, before he realized what Drent was suggesting. “Her? Gods no! I prefer my hands attached to my body, Drentie, no matter how nice hers is. You got that all wrong”

“Then set it right”, Drent offered, but Garen shook his head. “I’m done talking to you for the day. Go find someone else to annoy”, the mercenary growled, walking down the hill, leaving a chuckling Drent behind. In the meantime, the Storm Princess started to walk to the tower, which she had claimed completely for herself, only accompanied by Ser Emphryus. Montclair and Lady Tarel parted ways without another word, with Tarel walking in the same direction Garen left, deeper into the camp. Montclair looked around, spotted Drent on top of the hill and gave him a short handwave, commanding him to come over.

“You’re enjoying this mission so far, Golton?”, the sergeant asked and Drent stood to attention immediately. “Yes, Ser”, he intoned. Montclair let out a sigh. “Stand at ease, soldier”, he said, running the fingers of his right hand through his close-cropped blonde hair. “I noticed you spend a lot of time with Garen”

“I have few alternatives if I want a talk”, Drent explained. “I’m not particularly fond of him though” Montclair gave him a slight nod. “Me neither”, the sergeant revealed. “I don’t trust him. He and that manipulative upstart Tarel, I’m sure they plan something. I see them whispering, spending more time together than they should. The glances they give each other...” He let out a sigh and Drent gave him a curious look. “You don’t trust Lady Tarel either?”, he asked.

Montclair looked around, to make sure that no one was listening to their conversation. “Not at all. A peasant girl from the small village of Raylansfair, taken as a courtier by the old Lord Raylan, for her beauty and intelligence, said peasant girl ends up at the Storm King’s court, becoming one of his trusted advisors and by a lucky chance, she is the one to find out that our king has inherited the village she was born in? An awful lot of coincidences, don’t you think?”, he explained. Drent gave him a reluctant nod. He had barely talked to Lady Tarel in the years she had spent at Storm’s End so far and he disliked judging someone without knowing them

better, but her had to agree with Montclair. The self proclaimed lady acted suspiciously. Still, working with Garen? From what he knew, the mercenary and Ser Baron were close and every friend of Baron was usually an enemy of Tariel.

"What do you think they are planning?", he asked and Montclair looked towards the tower.

"Don't you find it suspicious that the king sends his beloved daughter to a mission like that, a mission that would highly benefit Lady Tariel?", the sergeant answered.

"You think she has any plans for the princess, sergeant?", Drent asked. Montclair narrowed his eyes and gave him a slow nod. "Soldier, I'd be surprised if she hasn't. She's a schemer, our so-called lady. And she is not a friend of the princess" "So you want me to keep my distance to Garen?", Drent asked and Montclair decidedly shook his head. "Oh no, Golton. I want you to stay close to him, to keep an eye on him, especially when he's near the princess", he explained. "The last thing we need is something happening to her on this mission. Argilac would burn the whole Reach to the ground. Of course, that would be our smallest problem, because our heads would be the first to roll"

Drent gave him a reluctant nod. "He admitted to me that he dislikes Argella's decisions", he revealed and Montclair pressed his lips together. "That alone does not make him a traitor though. Has the king ever executed people who criticise him?"

Montclair shook his head. "So far not, at least as long at they did not took it too far. But Argella is not her father as similar as they are. Truth be told, I have no idea how she would react", he stated. "But I agree. Simply criticising her does not make him a traitor. I don't trust him though. Perhaps I'm just paranoid, but I'm rather safe than sorry"

"I have to agree", Drent said. He wasn't too fond of Garen and had a slight distrust towards mercenaries in general. He never met a man who fought solely for gold, while keeping his honour intact and Garen was no difference. "So, should I look for him now?", he asked.

Montclair started to give him a nod, before looking over his shoulder. As Drent turned around, he saw Ser Emphryus Dresfel approaching them. Like most times, he was wearing his armour, albeit now that they had reached their camp for the night, he wasn't wearing a helmet, showing his thin dark hair. Drent suppressed a sigh.

"Montclair, Golton", the knight greeted them with a short nod. Drent and his sergeant stood attention in front of him and Dresfel looked at Drent. "Storm Princess wants to see you", he said shortly, pointing at the tower. "You follow me now"

As Ser Emphryus started to walk back to the tower without another word, Drent looked at Montclair. The sergeant watched the knight and let out a sigh. "He's in a bad mood today. Choose your words carefully around him, Golton. And don't let the princess wait. She hates waiting", he warned him. "I'll try to keep an eye on Garen in the meantime"

With these words, Drent and Montclair parted ways, with Drent approaching the tower and the waiting knight. "You had important talks with the sergeant?", Dresfel asked and Drent shook his head. Of course, he trusted him. There was no doubt that Emphryus Dresfel would be willing die for House Durrandon. But he was also known to act rash and without thinking through a situation. Dropping Garen's name in his presence and implying that he might plot against the princess could cause a bloodbath.

"Montclair is paranoid. He fears for the princess' safety", Drent explained and Dresfel let out a rough chuckle. "Montclair is a fool. As long as I am around, nothing can happen to her. Even if a thousand men would try to harm her, I would cut them all down without breaking a sweat", he proclaimed. Drent suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. And they called the Storm King 'The Arrogant'...

"What does the princess want from me?", he asked as they were walking up the stairs inside of the small tower, towards the upper tower room. Dresfel shrugged as an answer. "She did not tell me and I did not ask. You'll find out yourself", he answered, stopping in front of a large wooden door. He knocked heavily on it, before turning around, allowing Drent to pass. "It's open", a female voice from inside called and Drent took a deep breath. It did not happen all day that he was talking to a princess. In fact, he had never talked to her before and that made him slightly nervous.

The first thing he noticed as he entered the scarcely furnished room was the large, open window at the wall. Argella Durrandon was standing there, her black hair flowing openly in the wind. She was wearing a thick red dress today, appropriate for the colder evenings outside of Storm's End. Even after a full day on horseback, she looked stunningly beautiful, a hint of her royally pale skin being visible at the neck in an almost tantalising way. She had a friendly smile on her face and took a step away from the window.

"You are Drent Golton, am I right?", she asked. Drent noticed that his stance was relaxed, so he immediately stood attention as he hastily gave her a nod. "Yes, my princess", he answered swiftly. Argella let out a small chuckle. "Relax", she ordered. "Standing attention does not suit you. You look more like a soldier when you relax" A smirk appeared on her face as she approached the small, dusty table to Drent's right. "Unless of course you want to look like a sack of potatoes"

"That was... not my intention", Drent stuttered, slightly surprised by the casual tone in her voice. She gave him a benevolent nod. "As I imagined. Grab a seat. You want some wine?" Drent gave her a nod. He would never deny an offer of free wine, regardless of who offered it. Argella raised her eyebrow in surprise. "You do?", she asked. "Are you sure?"

Drent gulped as he slowly shook his head. "I meant no disrespect, my princess", he mumbled. The surprised look on her face seemed to be genuine as she looked towards a small carafe in

front of her. "Disrespect?", she asked. "Drent, if I wanted you to decline my offer, I wouldn't have asked. If you want some wine, take it"

"My princess, why have you sent for me?", Drent asked and finally moved his hand towards the carafe. The Princess gave him a pleased smile as he poured the wine into one of the two glasses on the table. "Thank you, that's enough", she said, grabbing the glass. Drent paused for a moment, before he continued to pour the wine into a second glass, this time for himself.

"Two reasons. First, I'd like to find out more about you. A lowly soldier, appointed as one of my personal guards. I expected father to give me a dozen knights instead of... well...", she explained and paused. "The second reason is, I figured that you must be a well-connected man, at least when it comes to the common soldiers. Emphryus stands above them and does not talk to them. Sergeant Montclair is their commanding officer. They talk to him, but rarely express their own thoughts and feelings. And finally this... Garion?"

"Garen", Drent corrected her and Argella gave him a thankful nod. "Garen, of course. He is an outsider from what I've seen. But you... you are one of the soldiers. Fought with these men, laughed with these men. And you follow my orders, yes?", she asked.

"All of them", Drent assured her, while asking himself more and more what she actually wanted from him. "Good", Argella answered. "First order. I want you to always tell me the truth. The full truth to any question I ask"

"Of course, my princess", Drent answered, taking a sip from his wine. She gave him a pleased smile, before taking a sip from her wine as well. "I am glad to hear this. I have a question for you. An important question", she explained, looking over her shoulder towards the open window. For a moment, her smile faded, replaced by a slightly distanced, perhaps even melancholic expression.

"I want you to tell me what these men out there think about me", she said. "I lead them, but I have the feeling they are not satisfied. I try to do things like my father would do, but alas, it seems I could do better" With these words she looked at Drent. "Which is where you come into play. You certainly know their opinions about me. Honest opinions. I'm especially looking for negative opinions, any criticism. And if you have names for me, people I could talk to in private, I would be more than grateful"

[Tell her that Garen is dissatisfied with her leadership]

Jenna

Her heart was beating furiously in her chest as Jenna was walking down the hallway of the castle. Next to her walked the new captain of the guard, Nora. Just watching her made Jenna a bit uncomfortable. Nora was all the things Jenna wasn't, strong, beautiful, confident. But the way she looked at her, the way everyone looked at her, bothered Jenna a lot. A mixture of shock and

pity. Jenna wanted no pity. She wanted to see the man who attacked her dead. Not only Wolfius, but also the one behind him, the one who sent him to Raylansfair and ordered him to kill her and Lady Halla. And to achieve this, she needed the help of a man whom she once deemed as the worst monster possible, before she met Wolfius. She needed the help of Harris Flowers.

Nora stopped in front of the door that lead to Lord Harris audience room. She hadn't talked much to Jenna, only saying the necessary things, almost as if she was uncomfortable talking to her. But now she looked at her for a moment, before looking away again. "He's inside. But... he is not in a good mood. While you were gone, someone arrived. Someone who will be trouble for all of us", she explained. Jenna gave her a curious look, slightly raising her left eyebrow. She regretted it immediately as pain flashed through her face as she moved the wounded part of it. "Who...", she managed to press through her teeth. "Lord Raylan's heir", Nora mumbled shortly, giving her a worried look. "Are you sure that you should..."

Jenna cut her off by giving her a quick nod. "I have to", she answered. She had to. There was nothing she'd like to do more right now than to go home, hide in her room and cry. But she couldn't do it. Not while there was still something left for her to do.

She reached for the doorknob, before stopping immediately as she realized the other thing Nora had said. "Lord Raylan has an heir?", she asked, her eyes wide opened. Nora pressed her lips together, nodding slowly. "The Lord of Mander's Mouth. He arrived with half of his guard. Thirty soldiers, Jenna", she explained. "That alone is a bit more than we have if you don't count the city guard", she added after a moment of silence.

"So... do you think he could plan to get his right by force?", Jenna asked, feeling uneasy as she said this. By force... there hasn't been an armed conflict in Raylansfair for six years, when the last raid had been repelled. As far as she knew, the last conflict with another Lord of the Reach had happened over two hundred years ago. The thought of bloodshed on the streets... it felt almost surreal. But so did the thought of a murderer being on the loose.

"That's why he and Lord Harris are talking", Nora answered. "And that's why Harris is in a bad mood. Are you sure you want to talk to him now?" Jenna gave her a short nod. "Have to", she remarked shortly. By the gods, she had to, or else the people she cared for had no chance of surviving this.

"Well then...", Nora said with an awkward smile. "Good luck, I guess. I'll go see after those assholes from Mander's Mouth. Have to take care they behave. I'm still not envying you" She turned around and started to walk down the hallway, leaving Jenna alone.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment, ignoring the uncomfortable feeling in her chest as she raised her hand and knocked on the door. "Come in", the disgruntled voice of

Harris growled after a short moment. Jenna gulped as she opened the door, entering the lord's audience room.

She had been in the room before, tasked with dusting it. Lord Robert never received many visitors in Raylansfair and she remembered it as a dead and lifeless room, just as she remembered everything in the lord's tower to be dead and lifeless. Now, it was at least marginally better. There was a warm fire burning in the fireplace, the flames casting shadows on the walls. Two large armchairs were placed near it, to give the two men sitting in them a bit of warmth.

One of the men was Harris, wearing a green tunic, his brown hair unkempt, dark rings under his eyes. He clearly hadn't slept since Jenna had seen him the last time. Still, his eyes pierced at her and his mouth formed a tired smile as he saw her. "Ah, Jenna. It's good to see you, although it might not be the best time for our talk", he greeted her, pointing at the second man. "Hobert, this is Jenna Harking, one of our servicersmaids"

"It's 'Lord Hobert', my dear Ser Harris, we have talked about this, remember?", the man said and jumped up from his chair, while starting to walk towards her. Jenna saw that he wasn't taller than herself and almost as skinny. His brown hair was cut short and he had a bony face. Still, his smile was extraordinarily charming and as he reached her he took an elegant bow and blew her a kiss on the hand. "It is always a pleasure to meet the servants!", he proclaimed, looking from a surprised Jenna to a frowning Harris. "Ah, but where are my manners?" He quickly put a hand onto his forehead and chuckled. "My name is Lord Hobert of Mander's Mouth", he introduced himself. "I am here to claim my inheritance"

He smiled at her, smoothing his extravagantly cut cloak, a long, orange-brown piece of clothing with a low neckline, reminding Jenna of the style Dornish merchants displayed whenever they arrived in Raylansfair. However, as he lacked their tanned and smooth skin, his choice of clothing looked a bit out of place in her opinion.

"M'lord", she greeted him with a deep curtsy, focussing on the ground he was standing on instead of looking at the man himself. "Good manners for a servicersmaid. I'm impressed, Jenna", Hobert said, slightly touching her chin with his left hand. She shivered, not out of fear, but out of surprise and in a reflex, she tried to turn away from him.

"There is one thing I'm curious about. This wound on your face... it's fresh, isn't it? What happened there?", he asked and his voice sounded genuinely sympathetic and friendly. Jenna opened her mouth to answer, but cut herself off just in time to look at Harris. The acting lord gave her a tired look, before giving her a barely noticeable nod.

"I... was... I was attacked", Jenna explained and noticed her voice cracking as she remembered the face of the beast, the knife in his hand. "Here in the castle, by the same man who killed the housekeeper"

Hobert raised an eyebrow in slight disbelief. "A murderer here in this castle?", he asked and looked at Harris. "My dear Ser Harris, I see I have chosen to arrive at a good time. A lot of challenges await the future lord of Raylansfair"

Harris gave him a nod, but Jenna noticed a hateful glare he shot at the man. "Without a doubt, Hobert", he answered. "Lord Hobert", Hobert corrected him with mild annoyance. "I mean, technically I don't have the title yet, but..." He looked at Jenna and gave her a slightly goofy grin. "It's only a formality now, really. My claim is ironclad, my source left me with no doubts"

"Ah yes, your source...", Harris growled with a dangerous tone in his voice. "Since your arrival surprised me to no end, would you mind to name this source?" He narrowed his eyes and folded his arms, leaning back in his armchair.

Hobert slowly shook his head. "I would mind, Ser Harris. My source will be revealed only to those who matter when it comes to my inheritance", he explained. "That would be King Mern Gardener and Lord Harlen Tyrell. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you are neither, aren't you?"

"You are correct", Harris growled and Hobert gave him a pleased nod. "I know I am, my dear Ser Harris. Trust me, I plan to reveal my source in time. Until then, my affairs are my affairs, not yours", he answered and looked back at Jenna. "Now back to this murderer. Speak, dear child. Don't be afraid to tell me the full truth. I am very interested in the problems my future seat has to face right now. Please, do me the favour"

He wanted to add something else, but was cut off by Harris rising from his chair and putting a hand on his shoulder. "With all due respect, *Hobert*, but you are no lord yet", he said with anger in his voice, slowly pushing the other man towards the door. "Until you are, Raylansfair's affairs are my affairs" He opened the door, pushing the surprised nobleman out. "Not yours"

Hobert opened his mouth in protest and raised a finger, but Harris closed the door right in front of him, effectively locking him out. As the acting lord turned around, he looked at least ten years older to Jenna. Of course, he was in his early fifties already, but the youthfulness Jenna had always admired was gone. She noticed signs of grey in his hair and beard and wondered if they had always been there or if she just never noticed them before.

"This is going to be a long, terrible day", Harris remarked and a desperate smile appeared on his face. "Lord Hobert of Mander's Mouth... what an arrogant prick. Comes here uninvited and acts like he owns the whole place"

"Is he truly Lord Raylan's heir?", Jenna asked, slightly disturbed by the unsettling weariness in Harris' behaviour. She had only seen him that vulnerable once. Only once, back when he had murdered Ser Ilhan...

Harris shrugged. "I don't know. Someone told him. And worse...", he mumbled and walked towards the large desk in the middle of the room. A number of documents was scattered across it and Harris needed a short moment to find what he was looking for. With a sigh, he raised a

small document. The letters were too small for Jenna to identify them, but she clearly saw the sigil. The stag of House Durrandon...

"Hobert is not even my greatest problem. A raven from Storm's End arrived in the morning. Apparently, someone here claimed that the true heir of Raylansfair is Argilac Durrandon", Harris muttered sullenly. "His daughter is on her way, together with five dozen men and the Storm King expects us to give her a proper welcome"

His face darkened as he screwed the piece of paper in his hands, throwing it across the room. "I have a self-proclaimed heir walking around my halls, with the daughter of this continent's most feared warrior king approaching", he uttered, shooting an angry glare at Jenna. She took a step backwards, closer towards the door as she noticed Harris' growing rage. "And to top it all, Hobert informed the king about Lord Raylan's death. Gardener has sent his steward, Lord Tyrell, to investigate in this matter"

A desperate chuckle forced its way out of his throat and Jenna took another step backwards as Harris looked at her. "You see, it hasn't been the best day for me. Now speak. Add more problems", he demanded. Jenna gulped. It scared her to see him desperate like this. It was undignified. Still, she had no pity for him. He brought his problems on himself.

"M'lord, what you told me earlier. The thing you could need my help with... You said you would help us in return", she stuttered and Harris facial expression got a bit calmer as he relaxed.

"Yes... I remember. My help... Jenna, I'm afraid after the events of today, my help might be less than you expect", he warned her. Jenna shrugged. "It does not matter. Anything will help.

Anything you can give. I'm willing to do anything in return", she answered firmly.

"Anything?", Harris asked. "Anything is a big word, Jenna" He came closer, looking her straight in the eye. "Are you willing to kill to keep the ones you love safe? Are you willing to suffer for them? Are you willing to be cruel if it keeps them safe? Are you willing to hurt them to save their lives?" For a moment, they stared at each other, before Jenna had to look down first. Harris mouth formed a joyless smirk. "As I expected. I know, I am willing to do anything, so that people like you don't have to"

"What do you want me to do, Lord Harris?", Jenna asked, still not daring to look into his desperate eyes. "Do you want me to kill? Do you want me to suffer, or to be cruel?" She looked up and finally straight in his eyes and felt anger as she saw the look in his eyes. This man, this murderer... his self-righteousness disgusted her. "Or do you want me to hurt the ones I love? Perhaps you want me to kill one of my friends, just like you killed Ser Ilhan!"

She paused immediately, the look of shock on her face mirroring the look in his eyes. This time, it was him who looked away first. "Perhaps I was wrong...", he mumbled and closed his eyes.

"But that does not change the fact that I know what you did, Jenna"

For a moment, Jenna just looked at him in confusion. The realization hit her immediately afterwards, tore down any thought of defiance against him, filled her with fear. "What... how...?", she stuttered. Harris opened his eyes again and Jenna half expected to see mad rage in them. Instead, she only saw sadness. "I know what you did. How you betrayed my trust. I know you told someone about what happened to Ilhan", he revealed and Jenna noticed that she was shivering.

"Please, m'lord... no, I... I... I was...", she stuttered, taking another step away from him, her back touching the cold stone wall. Harris let out a sigh. "Relax, Jenna. I have told you before and I will tell you again. I have no intentions of ever hurting you", he said and his words caused Jenna to calm down a bit. She noticed that tears had formed in her eyes. A part of her was repulsed by this. Crying out of fear... she felt pathetic. And this in turn made her angry.

"How have you found out?", she asked and was impressed by how calm her voice sounded. Harris looked towards the window, turning away from her as he walked towards it. "There were exactly two people who knew the truth about Ilhan, not counting me", he began to explain. "Lady Halla and you. These killers, they specifically targeted you two. If they would have fully succeeded with their mission, things would have looked even worse for me" He turned around again, looking at Jenna, who successfully resisted the urge to look away. "Someone out there knows the truth, because you told it. I know, Lady Halla kept it a secret. She was loyal. She was afraid. But you... you told it to someone, haven't you?"

Jenna was about to shake her head, as she remembered. The sudden realization caused her mouth to fall open as she took a quick step backwards. She remembered, a dolorous face, puffy eyes, a pudgy build, she remembered someone whom she confided in when she wasn't able to trust anyone else. She remembered someone who served the gods...

"Septon Corbin...", she mumbled weakly. "He was the only one I told it" For a moment, Harris just looked at her in disbelief. He slightly shook his head, weakly at first, then frantically, desperately as if he tried not to believe her. "Fuck!", he yelled at the top of his lungs. In a swift movement, his arm darted across the table, throwing documents, letters, quills and a clay jar on the ground. "Fuck!", he yelled again, slamming his fist on a table, loud enough to make Jenna shrink for a moment. There he was again... the man who killed Ser Ilhan.

"Corbin... he is one of my oldest remaining friends in this city...", Harris mumbled. "You're lying... you have to lie! Tell me that you're lying!" Jenna looked him in the eye and felt no pity for him at this moment. He was losing control over everything he tried to achieve and he deserved every moment of it. "Only Septon Corbin", she repeated sternly. "I told no one else"

A desperate and joyless smile appeared on Harris face as he looked down at his fists. "Do you have any idea what you have done, Jenna?", he asked. "If what you say is true, then you might as well caused the attack..."

A part of Jenna wanted to agree. A part of Jenna wanted to break down and cry and agree to him, that everything had been her fault. But then she remembered him, knife in hand, Ilhan's blood all over his body. And she knew who was truly at fault.

"If he ordered your deaths to incriminate me even more...", Harris began, but paused, turning away. She noticed his voice cracking. "Another one of my friends gone... I'm running out of allies", he continued weakly. She shot him a cold glare. "Perhaps you shouldn't have started to kill them", she growled, once again surprised by the aggressiveness in her voice.

Harris opened his mouth to answer something, but immediately closed it again, his eyes looking at her in a shocked way. "Yes...", he mumbled. "Perhaps I should have agreed with Ilhan, should have allowed Lord Hightower to destroy the city, to ruin all of it's inhabitants. Or perhaps you should stay silent when it comes to matters you know *nothing* about!"

He paused again and gulped, as he seemed to notice how harsh his voice started to sound. "I'm sorry...", he mumbled. "Haven't slept for three days. I don't mean to blame you for what happened. I need your help, Jenna" She gave him a cold nod. "And I need yours", she answered. "I will never forgive you, no matter how regretful you are. Perhaps I can understand why you did it, one day. But I will never agree with you. That does not matter though"

Harris looked up, curious for what she might say now. She shot him another glare and in a certain way it felt good to finally express her hatred for him. "You talked about how far I am willing to go to protect the ones I love? You think I am not willing to do all these things you mentioned?", she hissed. "You are wrong. I am willing to do much more, go much further. I am even willing to work with *you*"

She spat this last word in his face and saw him cringing. For a moment, these words stood between them, behind them a million unspoken ones. Harris face told her everything she needed to know. She was no longer afraid of him, not in the slightest. "What do you want me to do with Septon Corbin?", she asked.

Harris did not answer immediately. Looking at the ground, his hands opened and closed, his lower lip was shivering. Finally, he looked up, trying his best to calm down again. "I need his confession. If he is involved, I need him to confess. If he knows more about the people who killed Halla, who wounded you, I need to know it. Their names, their location, the one who is behind all of this"

"So you want me to get this confession?", Jenna asked and noticed how she slowly felt the return of her usual scared feeling. "How... I mean, how do you expect me to do this?" Harris let out a sigh and walked a step towards her, but stopped as she shivered. "Jenna, you are smarter than you think you are. You will find a way, I am sure of that"

"Could it... could it be dangerous?", Jenna asked, albeit she managed to sound less scared than she felt. Harris gave her a short nod. "Could be", he answered. "If he is guilty, he could try to do

something, anything, to evade capture. But I could give you one or two guards to accompany you to the Sept. If he tries anything, they could stop him. But..."

"But the presence of guards might give him the hint that we already suspect him. He might be less willing to tell us anything if he has the feeling that he has no chance of getting out of this again", Jenna finished his sentence, earning herself an impressed nod from Harris. "This is true, sadly", he agreed. "Corbin is a cautious man, but I know he underestimates you. If you approach him alone, you are more likely to get him to confess. However, he might try to kill you afterwards"

"Kill me?", Jenna asked in surprise. "Would he go that far?" Harris gave her a sad nod. "If he is working with the one who ordered the attacks on you and Halla, then yes, I have reason enough to believe that he would go that far", he answered. "It's all up to you. Do you want protection, or a better chance at getting what we need?"

[Confront Septon Corbin alone]

Samantha

It wasn't a question which knight she wanted to save more, it was a question which knight she was able to save. A cold and utterly pragmatic decision. Complete fucking bullshit. Samantha hated decisions like this. She knew, by saving one of the knights, she would make things harder for the other one. Saving one life, dooming another. That was not an easy decision, that should never be an easy decision.

"We're going after Constantine", she mumbled, her eyes still fixed on Lunett's mutilated corpse. Tears were flowing down her face, as she clenched her fists. She slowly knelt down next to Lunett, forcing herself to look at the gruesome wounds the young girl had sustained. "I'm sorry...", she mumbled softly. "Sorry I wasn't there to save you"

"Come on, you're not blaming yourself, are you?", Sasha asked in surprise. "You could have done nothing" She stopped as Samantha looked up and shot her a cold glare. "If I hadn't joined the fight against Butterfly, it could have been different", she insisted. "But no, I am not blaming myself. I could have done more to help her, but I am not responsible for..." She moved her hand towards the corpse and for a moment just stared at it in desperation. "I came too late to save her life. That's what I did wrong. All that's left for me to do here is putting her murderer to justice" "So you want to find the knights and then?", Sasha asked sceptically. "A one-woman crusade against whomever did this? Samantha, I hope you know that the person responsible for this is likely to be a very, very powerful man if he managed to frame your knights"

Samantha gave her a nod. "He wouldn't be the first powerful man I'd kill, she answered grimly. "I'm going after Constantine. He will give me the answers I need" Sasha pressed her lips together, letting out a slight sigh. "I'll help you. I mean, I'm still getting paid, right?"

"Double", Samantha confirmed. This seemed to please the other woman and she gave her a reassuring smile. "Then come. You should stop looking at... at her", she urged her. Samantha closed her eyes, moving her head away from the gruesome sight. "I will get my hands on the bastard who did this and I will make him pay. I will..."

She was cut off by the sound of footsteps approaching the room. Captain Farris from the city guard entered the room, looking genuinely sympathetic as his eyes fell onto Samantha, sitting on the ground. To her deep annoyance, she realized that she was still crying. Gods, she hadn't cried like this for... for years!

"Have you found what you were looking for?", Farris asked and Samantha shook her head. "I was looking for a wonderful young woman. I only found death", she answered. Farris gulped and took a step forwards, reaching his hand down in an attempt to help her up. She brushed it off, standing up on her own and he gave her a nod. "Oldtown", he explained. "Sooner or later, this city claims us all"

He looked at Sasha, who avoided to look anyone in the eyes, instead preferring to look out of the window. "If it helps, we found the men who did this. Two false knights, working for Butterfly for what we know. Commander Mullendore takes this very seriously. Trust me, there will be justice", he tried to reassure her.

Samantha knew, neither of them believed it, but she appreciated the gesture regardless. "Thank you for your help, Captain", she mumbled, her gaze falling on Lunett's body one last time. "What are you going to do to her?"

Farris looked slightly uncertain how he should answer, biting his lower lip before sighing. "Any relatives in the closer city area?", he asked. Samantha shook her head and Farris closed his eyes. "The law is clear on this matter. The Silent Sisters will tend to her corpse. She will be buried in a mass grave under the Starry Sept"

"She won't...", Sasha mumbled shortly, reaching her hand down to her purse, pulling out a few golden coins. She gave Samantha a short glare. "Where's her family?", she hissed. For a moment, Samantha gave her a surprised look, but she quickly regained enough composure to answer. "Raylansfair. Her father is Aylard Kawl", she answered.

Sasha frowned as she handed the surprised Farris the coins in her hand. "You heard her. I trust you to take care of this...", she growled, before glaring at Samantha again. "You're coming?", she asked and stormed out of the room.

"I will...", Farris mumbled, looking at Samantha. "That was... unexpected" He looked down at his hand, putting two of the coins into his pocket, before handing the rest back to Samantha. "This will suffice, give the rest back to her, please", he said and looked down on the mutilated corpse. "Raylansfair. Aylard Kawl. I know it's not much, but I'll make sure that she'll rest at home"

With these words, he signalized Samantha to leave the room. She gave him a thankful nod as she stepped past him, looking down the hallway. Sasha leant against the wall, glaring at her. "Thank you", Samantha shortly said and Sasha shook her head. "Don't mention it", she answered, turning around and continuing her way out of the building without looking back. "No, seriously. What you did...", Samantha attempted to initiate a conversation as they had stepped out of the inn, but she was cut off, when Sasha turned around, giving her a sullen stare. "I told you not to mention it. Never. To no one", she growled. "I had my reasons and don't want to discuss them with you. Fuck this city!"

"Fuck this city", the guardsman who stood next to the inn's door confirmed. Sasha gave him a glare cold enough to shut him up before giving Samantha a sign to follow her. They walked down the bleak alleyway for a moment, before Sasha grabbed her at the shoulders. "So, we're going after Jaylon?", she asked. Samantha gave her a nod and the other woman looked slightly less upset for a moment. "Killing him might make up for this fucking day. Now try to keep up, we're going fast"

And indeed, they ran fast. Sasha had a good speed and lead Samantha through tiny backalleys, past crooked houses and through places so dark that Samantha was sure they had never seen the light of the sun. Soon, she was lost in the tangled maze that formed the streets of Oldtown. During the way, the other woman spoke no word and it was sure that she wasn't interested in conversation. Usually, Samantha hated silence, when there was nothing to do besides loosing herself in her own thoughts. But this time... her heart was beating with fury. What was she thinking? What was she thinking when she put her own vengeance over an innocent girls life? Sasha stopped almost immediately, nearly fast enough for Samantha to bump into her. As she gave her a confused look, the other woman put a finger on her mouth, slowly pulling her into an adjacent alleyway. And then, Samantha heard it. Voices.

"And then he said 'You're Butterfly'", a male voice was heard. Jaylon! "Took him long enough to figure that out. And the look on his face, when he saw what Butterfly had done to his little girl, that was priceless!"

"Wish I could have been there. It's always you and Harrington who get to do the fun stuff", a second voice said. "Like getting stabbed by little girls for example"

The second voice and a third voice burst into laughter, before Jaylon silenced them. "Yeah, laugh all the way you want. You can be glad that you weren't part of the warehouse job"

In this moment, she saw him. Jaylon and his men, Leonard between them. The knight was pale and badly limping, but conscious. The four men walked down the alley Samantha and Sasha had been in just seconds before. "Anyway, Flowers little bitch got exactly what she deserved. As for the knights...", Jaylon said and Samantha stopped listening to him. How could he dare? She would make him pay for this!

Trembling with rage, she dashed past Sasha, who mumbled a muffled curse before running after her. She entered the alley, looking to her left, where she saw Jaylon and his men, not paying attention to her, joking, laughing... the thought of Lunett lying in a pool of her own blood overshadowed everything else at the moment.

"JAYLON!", she screamed, causing the men to stop and turn around. The first to recognize her was Leonard, who opened his mouth. "Samantha!", he exclaimed. "What are you..." He was cut off by Jaylon slamming his fist against the back of his head. The ugly man looked at her and raised an eyebrow as he recognized her. His eyes fell on the hatchet in her trembling right hand. "Are you fucking kidding me?", he growled, but put up a mockingly polite smile as he saw Sasha stepping next to her, holding her arakh in her right hand.

"Ah, it's Sasha again. And you brought your angry little friend with you", he said with an infuriating smirk. "What can I do for you?" His smirk faded, as Samantha tried to charge at him, only for Sasha to hold her back. "Let me!", she yelled in helpless anger. In this moment, nothing mattered, except ending his life, cutting this smug grin off his face!

"We're here for the knight, Jaylon!", Sasha shouted towards the group of guards, a remark that caused Jaylon's grin to reappear. "You know I can't do that, Sasha. You know I don't want to do that", he explained. "So, do you really want to risk a fight with us for this idiot here?"

"Butterfly is dead, Jaylon", Sasha urged him. "Have you switched your masters that quickly, dog?" This caused Jaylon to chuckle, as he slowly shook his head. "It's not that easy, Sasha. Now let me give you an advice if you want to stay alive in the events that will come, turn around, leave this city, return to the reeking pile of horseshit you call home and never look back"

Sasha narrowed her eyes and let out a sigh. "At least I tried", she groaned and pointed her sword at him. "Let me say this again. Give us the knight or else I will paint these walls with your blood", she continued, her voice sounding cold and hateful as she said this.

Jaylon almost seemed amused as he shrugged slightly. "Kill them", he ordered his men, while grabbing Leonard at the collar of his shirt. "And you're not going anywhere, you prick", he hissed in the knight's ear. "Not while Ser Maron has some questions left for you"

His men started to charge at Samantha and Sasha almost simultaneously. Both were armed with longswords, both wore light leather armour. One of them was obviously charging at Sasha, while the other one was targeting Samantha. Despite her anger, she knew exactly how she had to deal with such an opponent. She did not wait until he reached her, instead she went into the offensive as soon as he was close enough to hit her, just as he raised his sword to deliver a blow to her head. She used the moment he needed for this to get close enough to slam the blade of her left hatchet into his chest. While she failed to pierce the leather, the force of the blow pressed the air out of his lungs, causing him to stagger backwards as he gasped for air.

She tried to end his life by striking at his head with her right hatchet, but her opponent managed to save himself by raising his sword, deflecting the attack, but leaving his right side vulnerable in the process. Her left hatchet hit him in the ribs, slightly below the right arm, this time with enough force to pierce through the leather and cut through the flesh below. Her opponent let out a scream of pain, which was cut short as her right hatchet hit him in the throat, cleanly cutting through it and turning his screams to gurgles.

As Samantha looked over her shoulder, she saw that Sasha handled her opponent just fine. She had gripped the large hilt of her arakh with two hands, swinging it in a low curve, while simultaneously jumping to the side and evading any strike he may have been able to land. The arakh hit his belly, cutting through leather, clothes and flesh with enough force to create a large and deep gash. The mans eyes widened, as he slowly went to the ground, helplessly looking at his intestines, who were slowly oozing out of the wound. As he sank to the ground, Sasha and Samantha switched their attention to Jaylon, who gave them a surprised look as he slowly drew his sword.

Leonard used Jaylon's momentary confusion and attempted to ran towards Samantha, only for the mercenary to grab the knights collar again, this time a bit harder. "You're not going anywhere!", Jaylon yelled as he pulled Leonard back, moving his blade forward and plunging it deep into the knight's left upper leg, causing him to let out an agonizing scream. "And I'm going to make sure of that", Jaylon added, as he pulled his blade out of Leonard's leg again, causing the knight to slide to the ground immediately, pressing one hand on the wound at his waist and the other one against his upper leg in an attempt to stop the bleeding, his face a grimace of pain.

As Jaylon looked up, his grin got wider as he saw Samantha charging at him. He raised his sword, easily parrying her first strike, while simultaneously using the greater reach of his longsword by staying out of her range. She parried his riposte just as easily, but failed in the attempt to trap his longsword by taking a step forwards. The tip of his blade moved forwards, narrowly missing her neck, instead slightly cutting her shoulder and causing her to spring back, more out of reflex than out of actual pain. Jaylon widely grinned at her as he looked at the small cut and pointed his sword at her. "I'm going to kill you, angry girl. You should have stayed in the..." He narrowed his eyes as he looked past Samantha and raised his sword in a defensive stance

"Get down!", Sasha yelled behind her and Samantha immediately cowered down, as the arakh slit trough the air slightly above her head. The curved blade clashed against Jaylon's sword, nearly knocking it out of his hands. "He's mine!", Sasha growled as she quickly targeted her opponent with a rain of strikes.

Samantha gave her a nod, but was sure that her companion hadn't even seen it and instead focussed on grabbing Leonard at the shoulders, to drag him away from the fighters. The knight was pale, his trousers soaked with blood. His right hand was clutching onto the wound on his waist, but his left hand barely managed to cover the large gash on his upper leg. Blood was flowing out of it and the knight seemed to struggle to stay awake.

"Sam...antha...", he mumbled weakly. "What are you...?" "Saving your life", she hissed as she leant him against the wall of a house to her right. In front of her, Sasha nearly jumped up to target Jaylon from above, causing him to go down on his knees in the attempt to parry her strike. She quickly swirled her blade through the air, nearly decapitating him with her next attack. Jaylon barely managed to dodge the attack, but the arakh still managed to hit him, cutting through his chin, his cheek and severing a large part of his right ear with a single, swift movement.

Jaylon staggered backwards while yelling in obvious pain, raising his sword to parry another strike from Sasha, while moving his free hand towards the place where his ear was cleanly severed. Blood was flowing from the wound, but he still managed to pose a formidable threat to Sasha as he started to attack her in a violent frenzy.

Despite his wound, Jaylon managed to force Sasha into the defence, as he swiftly attempted several strikes aimed towards her head. While she managed to parry, Samantha saw him getting closer and closer, giving her less and less room to swing her sword, but simultaneously hindering his movements as well.

She realized what he tried to do and opened her mouth to call a warning the same moment Jaylon parried another strike of hers. He moved his knee upwards, violently kicking Sasha between the legs, immediately flooring her with agony as she had to drop her sword. A second, even harder kick hit her in the stomach, sending her falling onto her back, before he finally raised his sword above her head, putting a heavy boot onto her chest. "Any last words?", he asked, before looking up, noticing Samantha. She had raised from the ground, trembling with rage. "Get away from her", she managed to utter with clenched teeth.

For a moment, it looked as if Jaylon would indeed consider lowering his sword. For an even longer moment, it looked as if he would ram his sword down into Sasha's throat. Finally, he did something she did not expect. Without harming Sasha any further, Jaylon turned around and started to run down the alleyway, trying to get away from the fight as quickly as possible, albeit Samantha noticed that he slightly limped while running.

"After him!", Sasha managed to yell, despite the pain she was in. She tried to stagger back to her feet, only to drop down on all fours, heavily breathing while holding her stomach area. "Don't let him escape!"

Samantha gave Leonard a worried look. The knight was still barely conscious and raised his arm, pointing at Jaylon. "He...", he whispered. "Go!", Sasha yelled again. "I'm fine! I take care of Leonard! Now GO!" And that was all Samantha needed to know. She knew, Sasha was in no shape to run. Leonard was bleeding out, needing a healer quickly. But letting Jaylon escape? No, she could not do this, not after what he did. She had to trust in Sasha to save Leonard's life. The memory of Lunett reappeared in front of her inner eye and blinding rage caused her to run faster than ever, ignoring the heavy stitches in her sides.

Even though Jaylon had a headstart, she was faster. His leg seemed to be wounded, while she was filled with anger and adrenaline. And he noticed it too, trying his best to run faster, even if his wounded leg appeared to put him through a lot of pain. Despite this disadvantage, it took Samantha a surprisingly long time until she finally managed to catch up to him, chasing him through a maze of backalleys for at least fifteen minutes, gradually getting closer to him, before finally cornering him in a dead end.

"Any last words?", Samantha hissed with slight glee as the mercenary slowly turned around, a desperate look on his face. His head wound was still bleeding, his ear destroyed, but the source of his pain clearly came from his leg, where a large, dark spot was visible. "I surrender", Jaylon muttered, his eyes wide opened, grinning desperately.

"Don't look at me like that!", he protested as Samantha gave him a surprised look. "The wound on my leg reopened as I kicked that fucking dothraki cu..." He interrupted himself. "As I kicked Sasha. I don't know if I have a chance against you"

Samantha narrowed her eyes, walking closer towards him, which caused him to raise his sword.

"Stay back! Promise that you accept my surrender and I will drop my sword. I even have handcuffs with me! We don't need to fight!", he urged her. "And why should I do that?", Samantha spat. "After what you did... Why should I spare your life?"

"Because if you do, I will tell you everything I know about what's happening here. About Butterfly", he promised her. "Butterfly is dead", Samantha answered, taking another step forwards. "I saw him dying. You better find another reason for me to spare you"

Despite his situation, Jaylon managed to grin as he heard her words. "Oh, you stupid, stupid girl", he chuckled. "There's so much you don't know, Sammy" "Samantha", she answered with hatred in her voice. "Whatever", he answered. "Listen, we haven't started on good terms and we will never become friends. But if it saves my life, I am willing to work with you. I will tell you everything I know. And most importantly..." He paused, looking towards the sky. No... not the sky, she realized. "I can get you into the Hightower", he pleaded.

[Accept Jaylon's surrender and take him prisoner]

Jaron

"So, this is what happened", the Burned Man remarked after Jaron had finished, calmly looking at him. His face was motionless and Jaron almost assumed that he was still under the influence of the milk of the poppy, but the hint of sadness in his eyes told him how much attention the Burned Man truly paid. "Harpy did... these things to him?", he asked and Jaron gave him a short nod. He still remembered her in this moment and Martin's warning from earlier came to mind.

"I would have liked to talk to him", the Burned Man admitted. "In my mind, I imagined this conversation over and over. What I would say. What he would say. In the end, there was one question that would have truly mattered to me..." He paused, his charred hand slightly shivering.

"Why?", he mumbled. "I would have liked to ask him why he did these things. Has he...?"

Jaron slightly shook his head and the Burned Man let out a sigh. In this moment, he looked oddly approachable, not even nearly as powerful as he used to be, as if a part of him was missing. Jaron wasn't sure if the crippled man's melancholia came from the sudden and unexpected ending of the war that had defined the last four years of his life, or because of Harpy's actions.

"He said he would like to heal this city. I believe... I believe someone made him do all these things", Jaron explained. "Not necessarily a real person. He was sick in the head" The Burned Man gave him a nod. "Obviously", he agreed and for the first time since Jaron knew him, a genuine smile appeared on the man's face. "It is a good thing that he is dead"

Jaron gave him a reluctant nod. He wasn't proud of what he did in the warehouse, but he had to agree. Still... part of him wished he would have spared Butterfly, if only to prove that he was better than him. "What would have happened to him the moment you would have met him?", Jaron asked. The Burned Man's smile faded as he looked him sternly in the eye.

"We would have talked. We would have made a deal, one of these deals where I know that he will keep his end of the bargain. Then we would have made sure that the Solvers would have been disbanded, that men like the Tom or Harrington would be out of the city. And then I would have ordered his death", he explained calmly. "Mercy can be a good thing, but there are situations where it is inappropriate. Some men are too dangerous to get mercy. Some men don't deserve mercy"

He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Still, the knowledge that she had to be the one to kill him pains me", he revealed. "Up until now, she had managed to retain some of the innocence she had as a child, despite her surroundings. It was... it was something that set her apart from this city. Now, after what she did... only time will tell if it has a lasting effect on her"

"I'm sorry, Burned Man", Jaron said truthfully. By now, he regretted that he hadn't stepped in, that he hadn't stopped Harpy. The look on her face as they walked back to the Burned Man's

hideout, so utterly shocked at her own actions... it made him regret to give in to his anger. "I should have stopped her", he said.

"Maybe", the Burned Man agreed. "But I am not angry at you" A warm, friendly smile appeared on his face as he looked at Jaron. "If anything, I am indebted to you, in a way I will never be able to repay. What you did... you saved her life, you stood by her side. I can't thank you enough for this. And I intend to repay my debt, as much as possible"

He leant forwards, looking into Jaron's eyes. "What is the one thing you desire the most in this world. Do you desire more money than you can ever count? A castle and a title? Do you desire your name to live on for a thousand years?", he asked. "Whatever it is, name it and it shall be yours"

Jaron pressed his lips together as he thought of this question. What he desired the most in this world... For a moment, he had to imagine himself, standing in his own castle, a mountain of gold next to him... and her dark eyes, her gentle smile.

He took a moment too long to respond and the Burned Man's smile vanished. "I understand", he growled and for a moment, every trace of affability was gone from his face. "Do you like her?"

Jaron gave him a nod. "I... I do", he answered. "I mean she is..."

"I know", the Burned Man cut him off and his inquisitive stare pierced through Jaron, made him shiver. "I see the way you look at her and if it weren't for the way she looks back at you, I would be... very displeased by it"

"Ser, I...", Jaron stuttered, the look in the Burned Man's dark eyes being enough to make him shiver. "Silence, boy. Let me talk", the crimelord growled. "I can imagine what she sees in you. You are honest. Straightforward. Honourable. Character traits Harpy always longed for, but rarely encountered in the rotten world she grew up in. You fascinate her, just as she fascinates you" Finally, his face cleared up a little bit, the hint of a smile appearing on it. "Ser Jaron, if this is what you wish from me, I will not interfere in any of your attempts of getting closer to her"

For a moment, the two men looked at each other in silence. Jaron tried to resist the intimidating stare the man in front of him had and failed miserably. He gave him a short nod. "I like her", he admitted. "A lot actually. I know she has her flaws, to put it mildly, but that does not change a thing for me"

The Burned Man gave him a pleased nod. "Then go after her, with my blessing. Make her happy", he said and his smile faded. "But there is one thing, Jaron", he growled. "I like you, but if you ever break her heart, I will break everything else in your body. Always keep that in mind when you go after her"

Jaron gave him a slight nod, unsure how he should answer to this barely hidden threat. To his surprise, the Burned Man's kind smile returned and he started to chuckle as soon as he noticed Jaron's shocked stare. "The best thing about being the undisputed ruler of Oldtown's underworld

is that no one ever knows if you're joking or not", he said with a slight grin. "Though I'd like to advice you not to test me"

"Advice taken, Ser", Jaron said hastily. The uncomfortable warmth that always surrounded the Burned Man started to get to him. On top of that, the heat caused his broken arm to throb in pain. The crimelord tried to fold his hands, which would have looked more intimidating if the fingers on his charred left hand would have moved the way it should do. Still, the gaze in his dark eyes was intimidating enough. "It's a good thing that we understand each other", he said. "Now let me ask you a question to something completely unrelated. It could be better to change the topic here" His dark eyes stared at Jaron and he gave him a questioning look. "Butterfly might be dead, but that does not mean that this war is over is over. His men will continue. First messages from my eyes and ears around the city have already arrived", he explained.

"As expected, Jaylon Gordus switched sides and works for the city guard now, so he isn't a problem anymore. Samuel Harrington disappeared completely, which is a remarkable feat. I assume that he is still in this city, but he has yet to make his next move. But most importantly, a majority of the Solvers has joined the ranks of Butterfly's most cruel, most sadistic underling, the one who is known as 'The Tom'", he explained. "Finding the Tom and neutralizing the threat he poses has to be our next step. Only then can this city achieve true peace"

"And what do you plan once this city is at peace?", Jaron's mouth asked before his thoughts could stop him. The Burned Man raised an eyebrow, starting to tap with the fingers of his right hand. "You're meaning to ask if my plans for this city are any better than Butterfly's, aren't you?", he growled. "It depends. Do you see clean streets, an ultimately lower crime rate, the absence of starving orphans and a gentle order as bad goals?"

His face got a slightly upset expression, as he let out a sigh. "Oh, do not look at me like that!", he hissed. "What do you think were my plans for this city after Butterfly? Do you think I plan to turn this place into even more of a miserable hellhole? Do you think I plan to exploit the inhabitants of Oldtown, to suck them dry until they have nothing left?"

Jaron shook his head. "I... I don't know what you have planned, Ser", he answered and the Burned Man gave him a nod. "Well, you know now. Every city has criminal activity. Without someone to guide them, there will be anarchy on the streets. The bigger the city, the more desolate it's living conditions. The city guard is powerless compared to the power of the common thieves, the smugglers, the killers. That's why every city needs men like me", he answered and let out a sigh.

"I have never beaten a farmer into submission because he was unable to pay his taxes. I have never hung a whore who had to kill an influential punter in self defence. I have never mutilated a thief who stole a loaf of bread for his starving children", he explained. "And yet, they dare calling me a crimelord. Tell me, Ser Jaron, is this the kind of plan you would have expected from me?"

Jaron gulped, before shaking his head again. "So, you're telling me you have this cities best interests in mind?" he asked and the Burned Man gave him a smirk. "I have my best interests in mind, and hers, always. They just happen to overlap with what is best for Oldtown", he answered. "I plan to control the crime, to regulate it. I plan to feed the poor, to win their loyalty and their love. Of course, I plan to get filthy rich in doing so, even more than now, but can you blame me for profiting when everyone else profits as well?"

"No, Ser", Jaron mumbled. What the Burned Man implied sounded more noble than he would have expected from someone like him. It sounded like something he could even support. But one question remained... "Why are you doing this, Ser?", he asked. "All of this? I want to hear the truth"

For a moment, the Burned Man's gaze seemed to be distanced as he looked into the fireplaces, the flames reflecting in his dark eyes. He slightly began to shiver, despite the heat. "I can still feel the pain, Ser Jaron", he answered, without looking at him. "I still feel the fire, how it burns. I can still hear my own screams as it consumed my flesh. But most importantly, I remember what I promised, then and now, even before the fire touched me"

His gaze moved back to Jaron, but the fire still seemed to reflect in his eyes. "One day, I said to her, one day the whole world will be yours. There will be no master above you. They will all look up to you and all will be as it should be", he mumbled. "It has been a lie, back when I first said it, a white lie to put a smile on her face. It has been a lie when I lay in the gutters of Yunkai, preparing to die, a white lie to stop her from crying. Then we arrived in Oldtown and suddenly I saw the chance to turn a small piece of this lie into the truth. Suddenly I saw the opportunity to give her a small part of the world I always promised her" His gaze hardened as he leant forward and his baritone voice sounded even deeper as he continued. "Tell me, what kind of monster wouldn't have taken this chance?"

"That means you're doing it all for her?", Jaron asked, feeling a lump in his throat. The Burned Man shook his head, the hint of a smile on his face. "I would lie if I'd pretend that I don't enjoy the benefits my current situation gives me", he answered, only for his smile to fade again. "It does not matter if you believe me or not. I'm doing it for me, because it's among the few things I can still do, because I enjoy it, but more than anything else, I'm doing it for Harpy"

In this moment, Jaron did not doubt that he was hearing the truth. "I'm glad to see that we understand each other", the Burned Man stated. "Now, what are your plans after the events of today? I assume you have no intentions of spending the rest of your life working for me"

Jaron frowned as he heard this, slightly grinding his teeth. Of course, he had thought about it. Butterfly was dead and no matter how horrible this death had been, it was a good thing for the city, Jaron was almost sure of it. But there were still things to do for him. Of course, working with the Burned Man wasn't his idea of honourable behaviour, but he had done something good ever

since he arrived here, he had changed something. The people he met, he saw them as friends. Leaving them behind... maybe one day. But for now, he wasn't done here.

"I saw what Butterfly did to this city, to its people. I can imagine what his men will do", he explained and immediately noticed that he had the right thing. The Burned Man gave him a kind nod. "You say the Tom took over most of Butterfly's operations in the city. Clearly, he should be our next target" These words caused the Burned Man to raise an eyebrow. "Our?", he asked and Jaron gave him a nod. "Listen, Burned Man", he answered. "We don't have the same ideas about what is good and just in this world, but we have a similar understanding about injustice. You know I can't just turn around and leave now, when this city is only halfway through all of this. Which means, I will support you, until we have won"

A genuine smile flashed across the Burned Man's face and the crimelord almost seemed to be moved. "I am... I am pleased to hear this", he said with a controlled tone in his voice, albeit Jaron noticed that his shivering got stronger. The Burned Man seemed to notice this too and his facial expression started to get more forced as he gave Jaron a smile. "And now excuse me, please. I have a lot of work to do right now. Plans to make", he said and for a moment, his smile seemed to be distraught. "I... I haven't felt that free for years..."

Jaron suppressed the urge to salute in front of this man and settled for a short bow instead. Yes, that seemed appropriate. So... this was done. Butterfly was dead and no matter how much work there would remain, it would be a new chapter for this city. Only time would tell if it would be a good chapter under the Burned Man's rule.

The first thing he noticed as he left the room was the absence of the intense heat in the hallway. Compared to the always burning fireplace in the Burned Man's office, the rest of the mansion almost seemed to be chilly. The sudden change in temperature sent a shiver of pain through his left arm.

The second thing he noticed was the man leaning against the wall in front of him. He was about as tall as Jaron, but more muscular and he seemed vaguely familiar, his olive skin hinting at his non-westerosi origin. He had hazel eyes and brown, wavy hair, with a clean-shaven face and a prominently sturdy jawline.

"Kept me waiting, Ser Jaron", the man said with a grin as he approached him, giving him a strong handshake. "My name is Ayden Blackwell. We have met in the warehouse" As he mentioned it, Jaron remembered the man as one of several mercenaries who fought for Martin a few hours earlier. He had assumed that most, if not all of them had left the Burned Man's employ again after the job was done. To his content, he had obviously been wrong.

"It's a pleasure to meet you again, Ayden", Jaron said and the man gave him a short nod.

"You're probably wondering why I'm waiting for you", the mercenary said. "I guess I can thank your friend Martin for it. He thought it would be funny to give me the simple task of escorting you

to the mansions great hall in the second floor” Ayden's grin faded. “And he found it especially funny to sent me here half an hour ago”

He and Jaron shared a short chuckle and the knight had to shake his head. “Yeah, that's Martin. Always trying his best to make a good first impression”, he grinned. “What is happening in the great hall?” Ayden gave him a handwave, commanding him to follow, before he started to answer. “Your Burned Man is a generous man. I honestly regret that I haven't found my way to him earlier. He sponsored a great feast for his victorious men. Wine, ale, roasted meat, music, dance, whores, the whole nine yards. Martin dearly misses you there, after all it had been mainly your work that ensured our victory”

With these words, they entered the mansions great hall. Of course, great hall was a very generous term, considering they weren't inside of a castle. The walls were oak-panneled, just like the ground and just like everything inside of this mansion, it was lavishly decorated. Several large tables were located inside of this room, several fireplaces burning bright. The appetizing smell of roasted meat, paired with the bitter stench of cold ale lay in the air and the sounds alone were nearly earsplitting. As expected, the room was bristling with people, children, older people, men, women.

Before Jaron could enter the room, Ayden grabbed him at the shoulder. “There would be one more thing. I have already talked to the Burned Man earlier, when that backalley Maester took a look on your arm... how is that one anyway?”, he asked. Jaron tried to shrug and regretted the attempt immediately, as pain flashed through his elbow. “I won't loose it, which is pretty much the only good thing I can say about it. Hurts like seven hells”

“I guessed that much”, Ayden remarked. “For what it's worth, I hope it gets better soon. Anyway, I have talked to the Burned Man earlier, about the cat-masked freak they call Tom” The mention of this name immediately ensured Jaron's attention, as Ayden already continued. “You have talked about him, haven't you?”, he asked and Jaron gave him a nod. “Good. The thing is, I know a way how we could get to him. A plan of some sorts. Naturally, most of the Burned Man's best men will be involved in it. You. Martin. Obviously me too”

His explanation was cut short by someone calling Jaron's name in a loud tone. As Jaron looked inside of the hall, he quickly spotted Martin, sitting on a small table together with Bakr. While the Ghiscari was obviously pissed drunken, Martin seemed to be still somewhat sober and determined to change this. On his lap sat a nearly topless woman, obviously a whore from the way she laughed at every movement Martin made. Jaron had to admit that his friend had found a remarkably pretty whore however, a shapely young woman with olive skin and brown hair.

“Ser Bastard!”, Martin yelled and both, Bakr and the whore started to join in on his call. Ayden let out a sigh. “Usually, I would insist on making these plans first, you know. But today... there is a whole evening left to make plans. I don't enjoy this kind of entertainment, not with my girl back

home, but perhaps you'd like to join Martin and his... his acquaintance over there first. Just for a few hours of course. In the meantime, I can already start alone, making a few plans. You can join me later. Or perhaps you want to do this now, keeping your oh so funny friend waiting", he explained and looked past Jaron, past Martin, towards the door that lead to the balcony. "Or... there would be one more thing you should know. I know, it's none of my business, but... Harpy went out there shortly before I left the room. She took a large bottle of strong wine with her and looked like she could need every single drop of it. Looks like she hasn't returned yet"

He quickly raised his hands as he noticed the look in Jaron's eyes. "As I said, none of my business. Just thought you should know. I mean, you like her don't you? It's a long evening and I guess you will have time for all of it. The question is just what you'd like to do first. Making plans with me, fooling around with your friends or a... probably very uncomfortable talk"

[Join Martin and Bakr first]

Marak

Now, in the early afternoon, Raylansfair's surprisingly good excuse for an inn was well patronized. Of course, Noelle had no problem in finding a free table. Usually, she drew people towards her like moths towards a flame, but if needed she had the fascinating ability to push them away as well, something that came in handy whenever she needed a table for herself. Marak knew, she would tell him something about her plans if he would ask. He knew, she wouldn't object if he would sit next to her. But right now, after the things she told him, the things she expected him to do, he needed a strong drink and more importantly, he needed someone to talk to, someone who wouldn't answer in cryptic phrases, someone who had a good sense of humour, someone who worshipped the right gods. Well, at least that last part was hard to find here in Raylansfair, but the Seven were alright, he guessed. Of course, inferior to the Drowned God, but still better than pickled fish.

Thanks to his magnetic personality and his undeniable charisma, he already managed to get into contact with two men, probably locals or something he did not really care about. To his left sat a pudgy guy, at least a head shorter than he was, with messy light-brown hair and a moustache, paired with a pathetic excuse for a stubble beard. He had a somewhat sad and frustrated look in his light blue eyes as he stared into his ale. To his right sat a lanky and bony guy, who looked a lot less sad, with a clean shaven face, short, dark brown hair and a confident look in his brown eyes. He was visibly drunken already, but still managed to be surprisingly articulate. Marak never trusted men who were able to talk straight after consuming alcohol. Those were the men he had to be wary about.

"So, what is your problem, stranger?", the man with the moustache asked, albeit his voice made it clear that he couldn't be less interested in Marak's story. The lanky guy to his right put down

his ale and turned his head towards them, apparently slightly more interested. Marak let out a sigh and pointed at Noelle. He knew, he was subtle as always, but she somehow still noticed his movement from across the taproom and slightly narrowed her eyes.

"You see that woman over there?", he asked and both men nodded. "She looks pretty hot if you don't mind me saying", the lanky guy remarked, giving Marak a crooked grin. "Is she your girl?" Marak gave him a disgusted stare and quickly shook his head. "Hell no! She's not my girl, she's my problem. Noelle of Braavos, a legitimately insane madwoman. Ever since I met her, she won't stop babbling about her fire and how she sees exciting things to come, but all that happens is more talk and more scheming and more black magic... worst of all is, she honestly calls herself a priestess of something called 'rollmop'"

"R'hllor", the man with the moustache interjected and Marak gave him an irritated frown.

"What?", he asked and the man looked him in the eyes. "It's R'hllor, not rollmop. Common mistake, you're welcome", he explained and Marak shook his head. "Listen, I don't know you, but I travelled with that crazy lady over there through half of the Stormlands and the Reach. Trust me, I know how her equally crazy god is called", he insisted and the man visibly rolled with his eyes. "Whatever, be ungrateful", he moaned. "Not my job to correct you. Apparently I don't have a fucking job anyway"

"What is your problem, friend?", the lanky man asked and the man with the moustache let out another sigh. "Similar to that ripped beast next to us, my problem is a woman", he explained and Marak grinned as he heard the compliment. Ripped beast... now that was quite flattering!

"Similar to his problem, my woman is legitimately insane too. But she does not worship *R'hllor*", he explained and put a lot of emphasis on the name of the god. "I travelled with her through half of the continent, I cook her meals, I watch after her when she has nightmares, once I got imprisoned for her and I even saved her life from a bandit not long ago" His voice got on Marak's nerves, a squaking, whiny sound. By the Drowned God, if rollmop had a voice, it would sound like this!

"And do I get a 'Thank you' for my work? Any recognition at all? No, I get mocked. She tells me how useless I am and what a failure I am, just like everyone else", the man continued, apparently starting to talk himself into a rage. "I even trimmed my beard for her and all she did was laughing at me when I managed to cut myself with that cursed knife" Marak took a look at the man's moustache, raising an eyebrow at the term 'beard', as he moved the fingers of his right hand through the thick red hair that formed his own beard, falling down to his chest.

"Do you want her to thank you? Do you want to impress her?", the lanky man interrupted the tale and the other man looked up in surprise. He opened his mouth and quickly closed it again, slightly, but unconvincingly shaking his head.

"What? Her? No? Why... why should I? Why are you asking?", he stuttered. "It's not like she's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen! Okay... she is pretty. And sometimes she is friendly towards me, friendlier than most of the others. And she's bright and strong and has a good heart..." He interrupted himself, looking at his empty mug. "And that's the alcohol talking. Good man, I absolutely don't want anything to do with her. Ever since I met her, my life got even worse"

Even though this man was pathetic in Marak's eyes and annoying, he had to put his massive hand on the man's shoulder, causing the man to look up. "I know that feeling", Marak said sympathetically. "It sounds strange, but I completely understand you. Ever since I met Noelle, my life got a lot worse than before"

"You... you understand me?", the man with the moustache asked, completely surprised. Before Marak could answer, the lanky man interrupted him. "Now, that's touching. But could we talk about my problems for a moment?", he asked. "I mean, it's not like I'm not interested in your stories, but you're gonna be baffled when I tell you what my problem is"

"You got problems?", the man with the moustache asked and it sounded like a mixture between a question and a statement. The lanky man gave him a short nod. "Indeed I have, my chubby friend. And, you won't believe it, my problem is a woman too!", he exclaimed and from the way he said this he probably expected Marak and the moustache-man to look at him in awe. When the expected reaction didn't come, he slightly rolled with his eyes before continuing.

"You know, I recently visited my brother, my beloved older brother, after not seeing him for many years. We were very close in our childhood, so the least I expected of him was to give me a brotherly hug, to sit down with me and to talk about my problems, because as unlikely as it seems, I have quite a lot of them and they forced me to travel here, to this damnable city", the man explained and let out a sigh. "And when I finally arrived, all he talked about was his daughter. Literally every sentence out of his mouth had something to do with his daughter. I guess he mentioned his dead wife once, but I haven't really listened to him for most of the talk. Daughter here, daughter there, bah, bah, bah", he moaned.

"So, we're all here because of some problem with a woman?", the man with the moustache asked and Marak and the lanky man gave him a short nod. "Aye", Marak remarked. "Looks like it. Women are the source of our problems" "Most of our problems", the moustache-man interrupted him. "She is by no means all of my problems. The man she is working for is much, much worse, because he doesn't even look good while he ruins my life. Oh, and the whole goddamn Vale of Arryn of course, that's probably my biggest problem."

"Women are the source of most of our problems", Marak corrected himself and this time, the man gave him a pleased nod. "Yeah, you're welcome. Don't bother with thanking me for

correcting your mistake, it was my fucking pleasure”, he said with a whiny voice. “What's your name, by the way?”

Marak took another deep gulp from his mug, emptying it before answering. “Marak”, he said. “Just Marak” The man with the moustache gave him a short nod and shook his outstretched hand. “Pleased to meet someone who is not completely insane, Just Marak. My name is Irving Todd”

Irving and Marak looked towards the lanky man, who gave them another crooked smile, before giving them a clumsy bow. “May I introduce myself. The name is Alan Harking. Yes, *the* Alan Harking”, he introduced himself, before slightly coughing as he saw the puzzled looks on the faces of Marak and Irving. “Eh, you have probably never heard of me”

“Irving, Alan, it's a pleasure to meet you”, Marak said and he almost meant it. “So, we all have problems with women. I have heard somewhere that it helps to talk about problems. My problem is named Noelle Mield” He raised his mug. “Fuck Noelle!”, he almost exclaimed loudly, but thanks to his cunning mind, he managed to turn his voice down to a whisper. Still, he could feel her hot glare burning against the back of his head.

“My problem is named Maya Iresons. Ambassador Maya Iresons”, Irving explained and raised his mug. “Fuck Maya” Marak chuckled as he patted him on the back. “Man, I bet you would”, he answered and gleefully noticed how Irving's face got red. Instead of answering, the chubby man looked at Alan, who slightly shook his head. “Friends, problem or not, she is still my niece and I like her in some way, so I'm not going to say that”, he protested, before a sly smile appeared on his face. “Fuck women!”, he exclaimed loudly and Marak raised his mug. “That's something I can drink to! Fuck women!” Irving looked at them as if they had lost their minds, but raised his mug too. “Yeah, fuck women, I guess...”, he mumbled.

“Hey lllish!”, Alan called the barmaid, an unassuming looking girl with short, dark hair, far too thin for Marak's taste. “Fuck women”, the man told her with a grin, to which she narrowed her eyes in a mixture of anger and disbelief. Alan did not notice it and Marak had to shake his head at his lack of subtlety. Instead, the man even gave her a short wink, before leaning closer towards Marak. “That girl is totally into me”, he said with the grin of a drunken man.

“So, what's the deal with your niece either way?”, Irving asked, apparently uncomfortable with the current topic of the conversation. Marak was impressed at himself that he noticed this. Alan seemed to be pleased that someone asked him a question and immediately began to answer.

“Oh, you know... I haven't seen my brother for over a decade. There has been a slight misunderstanding after our father died and apparently I got most of his inheritance. Richard wasn't okay with that, we got into an argument, he called me names, like legacy hunter, or treacherous weasel and I, as the collected and mature brother, left this city and built a new existence in Oldtown. I swear, it wasn't my fault that I lost most of the money later...”, he started

to talk, but was cut off by Irving. "Whatever", the man moaned. "Turns out I'm not that interested in your story"

Alan gave him a frown before shaking his head. "But now comes the outrageous part. So, I went to my brothers home, to reconcile with him and of course, to ask him for a bit of money, and he wouldn't shut up about his daughter", he complained. "Apparently she got attacked by some sort of deranged killer while we were talking, but that's really not my fault, is it? I mean, I'm not saying he should put her aside completely, but a little bit of attention towards his long-lost brother would be nice, wouldn't it? Jenna is not the only one with problems after all"

Only then, Alan noticed the slightly shocked expression on Marak's and Irving's faces. "Whoa man... that sounds pretty, fucking selfish...", Irving said toneless and Alan cut him off with a pleased grin. "Exactly what I'm saying. I mean, I get it, Jenna was in danger, but hey, I could need some help too", he said quickly. "That sounds pretty fucking selfish from you", Irving completed his sentence. "Seven Hells, I really hope she does not see me the way I see you right now"

Alan gave him an irritated frown as a response, before opening his mouth again. "And you? Is your story any better?", he asked. Irving thought about this for a short moment, before slowly shaking his head. "It's actually quite depressing, now that I think about it", he admitted. "You know, I'm not even serving her out of my own free will. Lord Royce, the man we're both working for, basically forced me to go with her. Stupid Lord Royce and stupid Vale of Arryn!" He looked around as he said these last words, as if he expected anyone to be displeased by these words. "Ever since I first met her, I have to do all the stupid jobs, the ones our dear Miss Ambassador does not want to do", Irving moaned, let out a sigh and pressed his lips together, causing an upset look to appear on his face. "Cooking for her isn't too bad. After all, I get to eat some of it too. But oh, she won't stop complaining about the delicious meals I create. And then there is the rest. If there is a disgusting job to do, any disgusting job, you can bet your ass that she chooses me to do it. I always have to do the worst shift when it comes to guarding the camp at night and she even blames me when I fall asleep. She is the one who keeps giving me this shift, so if anything it is her fault!", he complained, causing Marak and Alan to exchange a quick look. The lanky man raised an eyebrow, a smile appearing on his face. "I'd give you the worst shift too", he chuckled. Irving either did not hear him or deliberately ignored this remark, as he continued without much of a pause. "I mean, I don't want to fight for her, like that creepy wolf knight or that stinking mountain man. I'm fine with doing some chores in the camp. But I travelled with her from Gulltown to Raylansfair, over five hundred miles. I'm not asking for much, but a little bit of respect at times would be nice!", he complained.

Marak wanted to shake his head at this complaining, whiny and overall pathetic man, but he still felt Noelle's fiery stare at the back of his head. Instead, he just gave him an understanding nod.

"You have no idea how familiar that sounds", he agreed. "If there is anyone to beat up, it's always me who has to do it. Looking intimidating? Of course I have to do this. Doesn't matter if I'm in a good mood or stuff, she commands me to look gruff and angry, so I have to look gruff and angry"

A smile appeared on Irving's face and Marak realized that the man finally found someone who was able to understand his problems. It would have been sad if it wasn't so damn funny. "Well, she's probably better at looking gruff and angry than me. Or at beating up people. Not that I want to beat up people. There's always the chance that they beat me up instead", Irving explained, calming down a little bit. "It would just be nice if she could show me that she appreciates my company, at least occasionally"

"Perhaps she doesn't", Alan interjected. "Appreciating your company, I mean" Irving gave him a glare and the lanky man raised his hands up to his head. "Oh, you're angry now? Come on, can't be the first time you hear something like that", he said with a grin and Marak felt obliged to intervene. He put a hand on Alan's back, the other on Irving's and gave each of them a friendly grin. "Mates, we really shouldn't insult each other. We are... what's the term? Comrades in suffering! Yes, that's the term!", he proclaimed, causing Alan and Irving to give him puzzled looks.

"Eh, maybe you're right...", Alan mumbled, looking from Irving to the massive axe strapped to Marak's back. "But I have to say that my niece Jenna isn't my biggest problem. You don't happen to have a bit of money?", he asked. "Not much of course! Perhaps one or two-hundred golden hands. You know, I got this friend from Volantis and he deals with awnings. For two-hundred, he would give me a whole shipment of them. I sell these to various noble houses all over the Reach and get my old fortune back in no time!"

"Awnings...", Irving repeated. "In the Reach. In late autumn" He looked at Alan as if the man had lost his mind. "I mean... I'm not saying it's a stupid idea, but it's about as useful as selling a mountain man's shit to Sharra Arryn", he explained. "Which means, yes, it is a stupid idea"

"Whatever", Alan growled, turning away from him. "You have obviously no idea. The winter will end, a long summer will follow and the noble ladies will need Harking's awnings" The way he put emphasis on the last two words made it seem as if he expected Marak and Irving to be in awe because of it. When the intended reaction clearly did not happen, he let out a frustrated sigh.

"Seven Hells, it's just like explaining something to Richard. The long hours outside have fried his brain. Now he even wants to hunt a group of serial killers"

This last sentence caught Marak's attention again and he narrowed his eyes. "Serial killers?", he asked. "Here in Raylansfair?" Alan gave him a nod and Irving slightly rolled with his eyes.

"Indeed", the lanky man explained. "At least two of them. They attacked my niece and now my

brother wants to go after them, as if he would be somehow qualified to do it. They have crossbows”

“Great...”, Irving mumbled sarcastically. “Just my fucking luck again. Of course there had to be a group of serial killers in the city the ambassador, emphasis on ass, decided to drag me to. How many have they killed already?” Alan shrugged indifferently before answering. “No idea. My niece is still alive, but they cut her face pretty badly. Apparently they killed some old woman in the castle and maybe some more. I don't really care”

“Oh man...”, Irving mumbled resignedly. “Guess with my luck, I'm going to be their next victim” He looked at Marak with a sullen frown on his face. “And you? What is it your priestess wants you to do? Perhaps anything that causes even more trouble in this city?”

Marak gave him an apologizing grin and a short nod. “I'm afraid yes. Honestly, I have no idea what she is planning specifically, but she's talking a lot about war and fire and other cosy things”, he answered, causing Irving to groan in frustration. “Stupid rollmop”, the chubby man complained and Marak nodded in agreement. “Stupid rollmop”, he confirmed and immediately felt her burning stare again.

“Umm, Marak...”, Alan cleared his throat. “Not going to say anything, but your hot priestess just started staring at you. I have the feeling she wants to talk to you” “To give me orders”, Marak interjected and attempted to stand up from his chair. “My friends, it has been nice. But now I have to return to the woman who pays my beer”

“Wait, Marak”, Irving said, grabbing his arm. “Or you could stay for a while longer before returning to your priestess, like a dog to it's owner. We had such a nice talk... about psychotic serial killers and stupid ambassadors and Alan's ego... well, at least we had a talk. Best one I had in weeks. Why don't you stay for a while? If she wants to talk to you, she can come here” Alan gave him a hasty nod. “Irving speaks the truth. Let her come, if she really wants to talk to you. In the meantime, you can buy us a new round, that would be an excellent decision”, he said and patted Marak on the back before the Ironborn had any chance to answer. “Splendid decision my friend! I'll take another mug of ale”

[Buy another round for Irving and Alan]

Raenna

The moment she entered the tavern, Raenna Minsworth knew she had made a mistake. Not a deadly one, hopefully, at least not for her. Still, from the way these men looked at her, like hungry animals, she could tell that there would be consequences. But she wouldn't turn around and leave, she wouldn't give them the satisfaction. As she walked towards the counter, she subtly checked what could have attracted their attention. Her daggers were well-hidden underneath the thick woolen cloak. Her slim body was well-hidden underneath the not very

flattering, but surprisingly comfortable leather armour. And finally, perhaps most importantly, her hair, well-hidden underneath her hood, wasn't it?

She could feel her cheeks blushing as she moved her hand towards her hood, noticing a loose strand of silvery-golden hair peeping out from underneath it. Ah, damn it. Her hair was the only thing her father ever gave her and perfect to attract attention. As the Old Man had told her, attracting attention would be the last thing she would want in her line of work. He had advised her to dye it. Clayton had ordered her to cut it. But the Old Man was living his sunset years in Braavos and Clayton wasn't her master. So she kept it, partly because she hated the rules Clayton tried to enforce on her and partly because she loved the colour. Of course, in situations like this, she still wished for a common dishwater blonde.

Raenna could almost feel the men's grin and their stares. Of course, she had seen their swords the moment she entered the tavern. They weren't as subtly hidden as they thought and neither were their glances towards her. She knew men like this, she had encountered them in every larger city she had ever visited and in some of the smaller ones as well. And this city was especially bad. After all, this was Oldtown.

She walked past the men, half expecting someone to make the huge mistake of grabbing her. There were four of them and apparently their sheer presence had been enough to shoo out every other guest this shabby tavern would have had during the afternoon hours. They were even more shabby than this building, smelling even worse than the ale they were drinking. It costed Raenna a lot of self-restraint to keep her aloof look as she noticed the lewd grin on the face of the man who sat the closest to her. He was missing an eye and the look in the remaining one reminded her of Clayton, in a truly unsettling way.

As Raenna sat down on one of the high bar stools in front of the counter, the innkeeper looked up from whatever he was doing behind the counter. Probably hiding. He was a thin man with a bushy beard, his dark hair greying, the look in his eyes genuinely worried. "Can I help you, young lady?", he asked and Raenna flashed him a kind smile. His gaze remained on her eyes for a while and she had to give him credit that he did not give her the usual unsettled look other people gave her when they spotted the colour. True, it was a very blueish shade of lilac, but still highly unusual when examined closely.

"Yes, good man", she answered. "I'd like a mug of your best ale, not the stuff you sold the guys over there. And I could kill for a hot meal" Someone who knew her would have been startled by this casual joke, even if there was no reason to get startled. Of course, there weren't many people who truly knew her.

"We don't get to see someone like you here very often", the innkeeper remarked, looking over her shoulder at the four men in the middle of the room. They were talking with muffled voices,

albeit the occasional scrap of conversation found its way to her ears. She did not like it at all.

"What do you mean?", she asked with narrowed eyes, even if she already knew the answer.

"Your hair, m'lady. And the eyes. We rarely get to see your kind here", the innkeeper answered.

"You from Dragonstone?" Raenna gave him a small nod and his face darkened. "You shouldn't be here, m'lady. It would be better if you leave"

"I will", she answered and the man gave her a pleased sigh. "After I got my meal. There's no way I'm leaving hungry" The innkeeper's smile vanished as quickly as it came. He let out a sigh and slightly shook his head. "M'lady, it is dangerous for you to be here", he warned her. A slightly amused smirk appeared on Raenna's face as she noticed the genuinely worried expression on her face. "These guys over there? Good man, they are not the first whoresons I encounter and they won't be the last", she tried to reassure him.

"You're new in Oldtown, aren't you, m'lady?", the innkeeper asked and she gave him a nod.

"These aren't your usual whoresons. These are Solvers" She gave him a curious look and he pressed his lips together. "Solvers, huh? What do they solve?", she asked. "Problems", the innkeeper answered and the way he pronounced the word gave her a bad feeling. "Or at least what they see as problems. Vigilantes, in a way that is not godly anymore. They had a good start, but now they are worse than everyone else in this city"

He took another look over her shoulder as one of the men at the table started to laugh over something one of the others had told. "And worst of all, they are drunken and in a good mood. Have you seen the blonde one?", he asked and Raenna gave him a nod. She had seen the lean man with his gaunt face, a crooked nose and even more crooked teeth. "His name is Karl and his wife gave birth to a healthy girl today. He has been celebrating for hours now", the innkeeper explained and Raenna gave him a frown. It was hard to believe for her that a man like the blonde one could have loved ones.

"And you mean he would...?", she asked and the innkeeper gave her a sad nod. "Trust me, he absolutely would. Not himself of course, but his friends. I am pretty sure some of them have never seen such a fine lady, if you don't mind me saying. And then there's your hair...", he answered.

His worry was refreshingly genuine and Raenna felt slightly bad for not just leaving this tavern, for his sake mainly. But she had her pride and would not run from a bunch of stray dogs. No matter how watered it was, her blood was still the same that once ran through the veins of the dragonlords of Valyria. "I can take care of myself, good man, trust me", she said towards him. "The only thing I can't manage is an empty stomach. Please, do something against it, unless you plan to starve me of course"

The innkeeper gave her a sullen nod. "As you wish, m'lady. But... I have to leave the room for that. Are you sure?", he asked. She gave him another nod, accompanied by a smile that should

express her confidence. With a sigh, the man turned around, leaving the room. And immediately, the atmosphere changed. The four dogs behind her picked up her scent. Their casual talk slowly died down.

“Hey, girl, why don't you come over here?”, one of them yelled. She did not react. “Are you deaf, girl? Come on, you can sit on my lap” She pressed her lips together to suppress an insulting remark and continued to stare at the wall behind the counter, which only seemed to infuriate the men even more.

“You're doing it wrong”, a second voice scolded the first one. “Let me handle this. Hey, silverhair! Did your whore of a mother fuck a dragon?” She let out an audible sigh of anger at this remark. Apparently, she just met the charming one of the bunch. Despite her anger, she found it amusing how close he came to the truth. She wasn't ashamed to admit that her mother had been a whore in more than one way, while the man who got her pregnant had been as close to a dragon as a human being could be. Or well, his brother had been. Her father on the other hand had just been the old dragonlords whoremongering brother and the only thing he ever gave her was his hair colour and a shade of his eye colour. And, of course, twelve fucked up years of a childhood she had to spend in a small room, hidden from his brother. Still gave her more than her mother. She definitely wasn't the only bastard he ever fathered in his life, but she was very likely the only one his brother hadn't burned alive to preserve the bloodline. Yeah, she got really lucky here...

“You heard me, dragon bitch?”, the man yelled again and she rolled with her eyes. Yes, he was obviously the charming one. Finally, she took a peak over her shoulder, mainly to identify him, which turned out to be a mistake as she saw four grins widening at the sight of her cold glare. “Ah, she heard me!”, a tall, brown-haired man, hairy like a bear, exclaimed. In case of trouble, Raenna decided to kill him first.

The return of the innkeeper caused her attention to shift back to the counter and she noticed that she felt relieved at the presence of this man, a relief that almost made her upset. She wasn't a child anymore and she didn't need the protection of this man. If anything, it was her who should protect him from these men.

He put a steaming bowl of soup in front of her and Raenna painfully noticed how long it had been since she had eaten for the last time. The cool ale he put next to the bowl only helped in stimulating her appetite and she gave the man a thankful look as she quickly pulled out a silver coin from her pocket, laying it in front of him. “Keep the rest”, she mumbled as she began to eat. “Looks like silverhair is hungry”, the first man chuckled. “Perhaps I got something in my pants for her!” This exclamation caused his friends to cheer him on, like primitive barbarians. “I doubt that”, Raenna hissed barely audibly and the innkeeper shivered. “Don't”, he warned her. “The Solvers are Butterfly's men”

“Do I look like a girl who fears a butterfly?”, Raenna asked with a slight smirk, albeit she felt a strange relief that the men hadn't heard her remark. The innkeeper slightly shook his head. “You should”, he warned her. “Butterfly owns this part of the city and I'm not only talking about the buildings”

This time she rolled with her eyes. So, Butterfly was one of *these* men. A few years ago, she would have been afraid. That was until she had seen for the first time how effortlessly the Old Man had killed one of these self-proclaimed crimelords, a brutal slaver from Volantis who would have deserved a far worse death than he got. She wasn't afraid of this Butterfly and she was definitely not afraid of his disgusting men. However, she also had no quarrel with him. All she would like to do at the moment was finishing her meal in peace and perhaps finding a well-paid job. After all, this was the main reason why she went to Oldtown in the first place, after cutting ties with Clayton. After Blackwater...

And Kersea... She had left her behind as well...

“As I said, I am not afraid”, she answered regretfully. The Old Man had taught her not to be afraid. Fear cuts deeper than swords, he used to say. Well, he used to say a lot of things, but this one in particular stood out for her. As she remembered him, she let out a sigh. She only noticed now how much she actually missed him.

“Dragon bitch, come over here!”, a loud voice ripped her out of her thoughts. Oh, for fucks sake! Despite her line of work, Raenna had never been a violent girl. But now she was only seconds away from striking back, twice as hard. These imbeciles, who insisted on calling her 'dragon' were apparently unable to continue this thought. Was bullying a dragon truly a bright idea? She put her spoon down, having finished her soup. A smile appeared on her face as she looked at the frowning innkeeper. “Thank you a lot, good man. It was very delicious”, she complimented him and he gave her a nervous nod. He narrowed his eyes as he looked over her shoulder again.

“Eh, the bitch is not listening”, a new voice growled. “You want some fun, friends?” The approving cheers the speaker got confirmed this. A grim smirk found its way to Raenna's face, even though she felt not amused at all. “I know you hear me, girl!”, he yelled. “I got a purse full with coins the colour of your hair and your name is on it”

“Don't!”, the innkeeper hissed towards her and she slightly shook her head. “I'm not that stupid, good man”, she answered softly. “Don't be afraid for me” A frown appeared on her face as she remembered the swords. Long and sharp and cruel... “But if something goes wrong”, she warned him. “Stay down and don't intervene”

“I got enough of that girl ignoring us”, a man yelled. “If she does not want to come over, I'll come over to her!” Yeah, subtlety wasn't his greatest strength... She bit her lower lip as she heard the sound of someone standing up from his chair. “Get her, Karl!”, one of the men cheered and she

gulped as she remembered what the innkeeper had told her earlier about this one. Her hand slowly moved to the well-hidden dagger on her belt.

"Hey silverhair", the man said softly as he stood behind her. The innkeeper shot glares at him, but thankfully he did not intervene. She finally looked at the man and he gave her a smile of fake kindness. A few women in the brothel her mother had been working in would have fallen for this smile, would have ignored the look in his eyes. A few women in the brothel her mother had been working in wouldn't have survived this situation, at least not with their dignity intact. He grinned, slightly less kind as he finally looked into her eyes. "You have lovely eyes, dragon girl", he said and his hand moved slowly upwards. She clenched her teeth as he touched her hood, slowly pulling it back, revealing the long strands of silvery golden hair on her head, tied into a strict bun. "And your hair... very pretty", he complimented her. She did not fall for any of his words.

"My men over there... they have never seen a Valyrian girl before", he continued. "Today is a day of celebration for me and for them as well. You can get very rich if you give them what they want. My name is Karl, by the way" Raenna let out a sigh and slowly shook her head, her right hand still firmly gripping the dagger on her belt. "I am not a whore", she told him sternly. "And I am not interested. Use your money to buy your friends a girl if they are so horny"

Karl's smile faded as he slightly shook his head, his right hand still firmly resting on her shoulder. "I'm afraid that wasn't an offer you can refuse, silverhair", he growled and she narrowed her eyes. "But if you're not a whore..." He grinned as his hand moved down, firmly gripping her waist, uncomfortably squeezing her hip. Her eyes fell upon his left hand, which was still resting on the counter. "We don't have to pay you", he growled and attempted to pull her back. She used this moment to strike, pulling out her dagger with a quick movement and embedding it deeply into his left hand and into the wood below, effectively nailing it to the counter.

Karl let out an agonizing cry and let go of her. She quickly used her newly gained freedom to jump up from her chair, to spin around and to deliver a high kick to his chin. The force of the kick was enough to send him to the ground and to cause his hand to rip away from the dagger, nearly splitting it in half in a wound that was painful just to look at.

"The fuck!", the men at the table yelled, as they jumped up from their chairs. Three longswords were drawn as she calmly pulled out the dagger from the counter, ignoring Karl's pained sobs. The man was lying on the ground, clutching his destroyed hand, clearly not a danger anymore. Well, he had never been a danger to begin with. And these three... they had no idea whom they were messing with.

"Wrong fucking move, dragongirl!", one of the men yelled. Raenna recognized him as the charming one and grounded her teeth as she saw him approaching. "Shame for such a nice

piece of ass, but you're going to pay for that!", he shouted as he charged at her, his companions closely behind him.

It would have been a hard fight if they would have been skilled. Three men as good as Clayton would have effortlessly killed her now. But these men... they trained by fighting beggars or each other. And the location was a disadvantage for them. Shortly before Charmer got close enough to strike at her, she ducked and jumped forwards, his strike narrowly missing her head. She jumped underneath one of the tables, the second man's sword only hitting the wood above her. In an often practised move, she plunged her dagger deeply into the back of Charmer's knee, sending him to the ground.

The second man used this moment to overthrow the table with his left hand, raising his right hand to strike with his sword again. She jumped up before he could lower his weapon again and embedded the dagger deeply into throat. While pulling it out, she took a quick step to the side, to evade her third and last opponents strike. The sword missed her and to an innocent bystander it must have looked as if she had sheer luck.

Not in the mood to toy around with an opponent like this, she charged forwards directly after the man's sword missed her, ramming the dagger deeply into his chest. His eyes widened as he looked at her and at the blade slightly above his heart. For a moment, he raised his sword again, just as Raenna raised an eyebrow. Then, the weapon fell out of his weak hands, as his body grew limp.

Breathing heavily, Raenna looked around. Four opponents. Roughly ten seconds. She pressed her lips together and shook her head. The Old Man would have needed five. How disappointing. Two of her opponents were dead. Charmer lay on the ground, clutching the hole in his knee. The innkeeper looked at her in complete shock. And Karl...

"You goddamn bitch...", he growled as he raised from the ground. She was not a healer, but a glimpse on his left hand proved to her that it was basically destroyed. He wouldn't lose it, probably, but it was unlikely that he would ever regain full use of it. Still, his right hand firmly held a longsword and he pointed it at her, fury in his gaze. "I'm going to make you pay for this!", he yelled and she shook her head.

"Don't be stupid, Karl", she urged him, remembering what the innkeeper had told her earlier. "Two of your friends are dead. The third one..." She paused and looked back at him, noticing the fear on his face, the pain, the anger. "You have a daughter, am I right?", she asked. Karl narrowed his eyes as he gave her a slow nod. "Yes... What's it to you?", he asked, his unwounded hand shaking heavily. Despite her anger and her disgust, Raenna felt a sting of regret and forced herself to give him a kind and forgiving look.

“Don't throw your life away”, she urged him again. “I doubt someone like you would be a good father, but still... it's worth a try. Lower your weapon and go, look for a healer. Return to your wife and your little girl and don't look back”

Her words seem to move something inside of him, something she wasn't expecting to see. To her surprise, he gave her a nod, throwing his sword on the ground. “You have won, this time. But this is not over. Butterfly will hear about this”, he warned her, before walking past her. He glared at her, just as she glared at him. “I don't want to see you *ever* again”, Raenna warned him. “Next time, I won't be merciful” He did not answer. He didn't even look back as he walked out of the tavern, still clutching his bleeding hand. Raenna's gaze fell on the sobbing man on the ground, the charming one, and she slowly approached him.

“And now you... remember what you called me?”, she hissed. His eyes widened as he raised one of his hands, the other one still wrapped around his knee. “No, no, no!”, he yelled in fear, tears flowing down his face. “Don't kill me, I beg you! I have a family too! My... my old mother. She's sick! And I have three children... Four! Four children! Please! I don't want to die!”

[Kill him]

Lucas

Lucas slowly opened his eyes, despite the pain it caused him. The first thing he noticed was that he was sitting in a pitch black room, almost unable to move. Panic started to rise inside of him, his heart started to thump wildly in his chest, his breath almost out of control as he started to shake. He remembered... Leonard and Jaylon and Maron Mullendore and... Lunett...

Tears formed in Lucas' eyes as he tried to raise his hands, tried to move his feet. It did not took him long to realize the situation he was in at the moment. His legs were uncomfortably chained to a chair, his hands chained to a table or something like that, right in front of him, in a way that prevented any movement of his limbs. Gods no... he remembered the look in Mullendore's eyes as he...

Lucas pressed his lips together as he stopped any attempt to loosen his chains. By the gods, what has he done? Lunett, she... He closed his eyes to blink the tears away, his lower lip trembling. She could have survived if she would have never entered this city. He had brought her here. To Oldtown. To Mullendore.

A loud and painful creak sounded, as a door a few metres in front of him was opened. The dim light of a torch illuminated the small room and even if it wasn't particularly bright, it almost seemed to be glaring for Lucas, causing pain in his eyes as he had to look down to the table in front of him in an attempt to avoid looking directly into the flame. He had already recognized the man who just entered his room. He was wearing a white tabard today, showing six black and

orange butterflies, paired with a truly sickening grin. "I see you're awake", Maron Mullendore greeted him with a mockingly polite nod. "I'm curious how long this will last"

He placed the torch in a small torch holder and walked closer to the table, resting his hands on it as he gleefully looked at Lucas. His green eyes moved as he looked from Lucas' hands up to his face, his grin getting wider with every second. Lucas on the other hand put all his hatred in his stare, trembling with anger, as none of the two men said a word. Mullendore narrowed his eyes as Lucas shot him a glare, his grin vanishing. All of a sudden, in a movement that was too quick to follow, he moved his right hand to his belt, pulling out a long, sharp knife and ramming it deeply into the wood of the table between Lucas' hands.

The sound it caused was loud and sudden enough to cause Lucas to wince as he nearly jumped up from his chair. The uncomfortably close chains prevented this and he sank back onto his chair. Mullendore's grin reappeared as he pulled the knife out of the wood again, gently moving the fingers of his left hand over the blade. "You look like shit, boy", he growled. "Jaylon fucked you up pretty rough. I had to intervene to prevent him from killing you" He gently lay the knife onto the table, looking at it for a moment.

"Let me guess, I'm soon going to regret that you spared my life", Lucas spat at him and Mullendore narrowed his eyes. "It depends on you and your cooperation. It always depended on your cooperation", he answered. "You fucked up, boy. All of your friends are dead. Even your little girl, just because you chose to oppose me. Now you're all alone. And you will answer my questions" He looked at the knife in his hands and his sickening smile reappeared.

"The fuck I'm going to do!", Lucas spat at him and Mullendore closed his eyes. "Trust me, you will, sooner or later. For your own interest, tell me what I need to know. If you hope for help, you are ridiculous. No one is looking for you. No one even knows you're here..."

Lucas pressed his lips together, shivering, at least partially out of fear. He did not want to die in this dark hole, at the hands of this man. He wanted to tear his chains apart, wanted to beat this man to death... Lucas Flowers had always believed in ideals. Mercy had always been one of it. But there would be no mercy for Maron Mullendore. For the first time in his life, Lucas felt true hatred. "What do you want from me?", he growled.

Mullendore's smile faded into a slight smirk as he continued. "From the moment you entered the city, my men had their eyes on you. The guard you talked to when you entered the city informed Jaylon. Jaylon informed me", he explained. "From the moment you left the Citadel, I knew you had this boy with you. Unfortunately, I did not know where you brought him, until you had been kind enough to tell me" He leant forwards, grabbing Lucas at the collar of his shirt and pulling him closer, at least as much as Lucas' chains allowed it.

"I was willing to show mercy, to you, to Leonard, to your little girl, if I would get Dairon in exchange. Even after you dared to lie to my face two times, I was willing to show you mercy", he

growled with barely suppressed anger in his voice. "Then I arrived at the inn, only for your little bitch to distract me, long enough for Dairon to escape"

He let go of Lucas, raising from the table as he started to walk around it until he stood behind Lucas. "This is the reason she had to die. This is the reason you're here", the false knight whispered in his ear. "Tell me what I want to know and we can end this. Stay silent and I will hurt you, more than I ever hurt her" He continued to walk around the table, sitting back on the chair in front of Lucas as soon as he reached it. "I have to say, you had a good taste in women", he snarled with a truly cruel grin.

"Fuck you!", Lucas exclaimed furiously, once again trying to jump up. "I won't tell you anything, you son of a bitch!" Mullendore's grin vanished as quick as it came and he raised from his chair. "As I said, you will. The only question is, how much do I have to hurt you?", he answered and his gaze hardened. "However, I do not appreciate you insulting me. Do that one more time and you're going to regret it"

With these words, he grabbed Lucas left hand and for a moment, Lucas had to suppress the urge to gasp in fear. He wouldn't give him this satisfaction. "For now, a little reminder should be enough", Mullendore snarled, slowly moving Lucas pinky finger upwards. "Just a little taste of the things to come" Lucas started to breath heavily, as pain flashed through his hand. The moment he heard and felt the crackening sound, the wave of pain coming from his pinky finger, he couldn't help it, a muffled, but clearly pained scream forced its way out of his throat.

Mullendore chuckled as he looked at Lucas hand and as the knight finally managed to regulate his breathing again and found the courage to look down, he saw that his pinky finger was protruding from his hand in a way that was agonizing just to look at. Before he could even think about calming down again, his torturer grabbed the broken finger, causing Lucas to let out another pained groan. "Lesson learned?", the false knight asked and with a swift movement, he snapped the bone back into position, prompting yet another scream from Lucas, yet another smirk from Mullendore. "Just as I thought", he chuckled.

While Lucas was still breathing heavily, recovering from the thumping pain in his left hand, Mullendore turned around, facing the door for a moment. He let out something resembling a sigh as he looked back at Lucas. "I'm afraid our time together comes to an end", he growled and for a moment, the words stood between them.

"I'm not going to kill you, Lucas", Mullendore revealed. "Perhaps later, if you're a good boy. But I am a very busy man. This city does not save itself. Because of this, I have ordered a specialist to take over" A hint of the honest smile Lucas had seen on his face when they met for the first time reappeared, but now it looked twisted and cold. "He is going to get my answers", he said and sat down again, looking at Lucas almost in a caring way. "But, you won't be the same

afterwards, I promise. Which is why I want to give you one last chance to answer my question: Where is my runt?"

For a moment, Lucas gave him a surprised look as he realized the meaning of these words.

"Your... your runt?", he asked. Mullendore gave him a short nod and a smirk before answering.

"My runt. Perhaps the term 'Son' would be a bit too much for a weakling who decides to become a fucking Maester", he revealed.

"But he said his mother...", Lucas exclaimed before interrupting himself. Dairon had claimed that his mother had been raped by a knight. Back then, Lucas hadn't believed him. Had joked that a true knight would never do this. And now he had the epitome of a false knight sitting right in front of him and he finally believed.

"Yes, yes she claimed that. It wasn't rape, as I can assure you she that she enjoyed it as much as I did", Mullendore claimed. "Of course that did not stop her from spreading a few disgusting lies later on" A slight grin appeared on his face. "So I stopped treating her like a lady. In retrospect, I should have broken her neck like I broke her fingers", he chuckled, before his gaze hardened. "He is not my son, he is my runt. I have many runts, bastards who aren't even worthy of being a Flowers. Dairon the little Maester is one of many. The only one I am willing to call my son is Yoreen, the only one who deserves respect", he explained "In your own best interest, tell me what I want to know and spare yourself a lot"

Lucas shook his head. "I won't and I never will. Bring it on", he answered, every word oozing with hatred. Mullendore gave him a stern nod. "Brave words, boy. We'll see what kind of man you are the moment the knife touches your skin", he answered, before looking over his shoulder, towards the door. "SPHYNX!", he yelled at the top of his lungs.

The echo of his words echoed from the surrounding walls and for a moment, there was only silence. Then, Lucas heard soft, shuffling footsteps slowly approaching the door. Mullendore's grin lost every trace of affability as he looked back at Lucas. "I warned you, boy. I warned you because I admire your stubbornness. I deeply regret that it had to come to this", he said, obviously lying. "But the man who is going to enter the room now..."

He was cut off by the sound of the door getting opened. Not one, but two people entered the room. The one who was walking first was a young boy, certainly far from being a man, with bedraggled blonde hair, extremely pale skin and horribly light grey eyes. He was wearing a simple, dark tunic and carried a small bag with him. Lucas saw a deep scar on his left cheek.

The moment the grey eyes of the boy fell upon Lucas, a smirk appeared on his face.

Behind him walked a lean figure, clad in long, plain white clothes which concealed the whole body, including a hood. His face was covered by a flat, pitch black mask, depicting a stylized cat with a flat snout. The man took a short bow in front of Mullendore and his dark eyes looked

almost amused as his gaze fell upon Lucas. "Maron, it is a pleasure to see you again", the man said with a soft, almost soothing voice.

Mullendore gave the newcomer a friendly grin and pulled him into a short hug. "Sphinx, you ugly bastard! Wearing that mask again, eh? Probably for the better", he said with roaring voice. The man gave him an affirmative nod. "We're all wearing masks, Maron. Hiding our true nature, or am I wrong, Butterfly?", he answered. Mullendore narrowed his eyes. "Let's stay with Maron. Butterfly is dead", he growled and looked at Lucas. "Lucas, this is the Sphinx, your new best friend"

Before the Sphinx could say anything, Mullendore looked at the blonde boy with a stern look. The boy on the other hand gave him a wolfish grin without any fear. "And who is this? Is he one of you cat people? Where is his mask?", the false knight asked. The Sphinx took a step forwards, putting a hand on the boys shoulder. "Maron, this is Conor, my new apprentice", the Sphinx revealed. "He hasn't yet earned his mask, but he has talent" Even though the mask was concealing the man's face, perhaps thankfully, Lucas could see that he was grinning. "He is Lupin's brother"

"Lupin?", Mullendore asked in confusion, before widely opening his eyes. "You mean... Seven fucking Hells, the resemblance is uncanny. Are you sure it's a good idea to give something like him a taste for blood?" The Sphinx gave him a decisive nod. "He is the best apprentice I ever had", he said and a smirk appeared on the boys face as he took a mocking bow in front of Mullendore. "Pleasure to meet you, Ser Maron", he said in a mildly annoyed voice. Mullendore narrowed his eyes as a frown appeared on his face. In a swift movement, he grabbed him at the collar and pulled him close to his face. "Boy, I don't like the way you talk to me", he growled, before letting out a sigh. "But you are just like your brother. You're probably enjoying this" Conor gave him a nod, which almost seemed to infuriate Mullendore even more, but the knight finally let go of the boy. "I'm leaving you alone now. Sphinx, keep him alive, but don't hold back", he ordered, before looking at Lucas one last time. "I'll be checking on what's left of you in a few hours. Until then, boy" And with these words, Mullendore left the room, leaving Lucas in the company of the most unsettling boy he had ever encountered. And in the company of the Sphinx...

The masked man sat down on Mullendore's chair, giving Lucas a polite nod. "Lucas, it is a pleasure to meet you. Maron had told me about the fun you two already had", he greeted him. "I am the Sphinx and I will be your interrogator" With these words, he reached into the depths of his robe, pulling out a long, sharpened knife. "It's not too late to tell me everything I want to know"

"Fuck you", Lucas hissed. It was a low insult, something he usually wouldn't do, but the increasing hopelessness of his situation started to affect him. Even more than the despair he felt

over Lunett's death, even more than the worry he felt for Leonard, Lucas Flowers was afraid, deeply and utterly afraid in a way he never was in all his life.

The Sphynx narrowed his dark eyes slowly shifting his attention towards the knife. "That was a pathetic insult, Lucas. I'm sure you can do better", he promised, before grabbing Lucas left hand. "We're going to start slow. Every time you don't answer me, I'm going to increase the pain. This knife has many functions, but I will also use pliers, a hammer, nails and of course, a hatchet, a bonesaw, my intelligence and raw force", he explained. "All you have to tell me is where Maron's son currently hides and I will stop hurting you. I promise"

The tone of his voice made it impossible for Lucas to detect if he was lying or telling the truth. It did not matter. Lucas had no intention of revealing Dairon's location. He had seen what Mullendore did to Lunett and he... for a moment, Lucas had to close his eyes, so that he wouldn't show any weakness in front of the Sphynx. When he opened them again, he looked directly at the Sphynx and attempted to spit at the man. A few drops of saliva left his dry mouth, hitting the masked man's robe. The Sphynx narrowed his eyes and started to chuckle in a horrifyingly calm way. "We're going to play a little game, to break the ice. Why don't we sing a song together?", he asked "I'm sure you know the text. It goes like this..."

With these words, he started to whistle a tune Lucas knew too well, while slightly cut into the flesh of his Lucas' thumb, causing the knight to suppress a pained groan, while Conor's smile widened, just as the Sphynx eyes got an almost amused look in them.

"This little piggy went to the market", the masked man hissed and pulled the knife out of Lucas' finger.

The cut wasn't deep, but painful enough for Lucas to clench his teeth. Without giving him a moment to recover, the Sphynx moved on to Lucas' index finger, still whistling his tune.

"This little piggy stayed home", he exclaimed with sadistic joy as he slightly cut into the top of the finger.

"This little piggy had roast beef", he continued as he moved on to the middle finger in a single movement.

"This little piggy had none", he snarled as he cut deeply into the flesh of Lucas' ringfinger.

The knight was breathing heavily, letting out groans of pain, which only seemed to cause the Sphynx to whistle even louder, a tune he knew just too well. Tears of agony were flowing down Lucas' face, even though he tried his best to stop it. He stayed silent. He couldn't do this to Dairon... But he knew all too well which finger would be the next.

The Sphynx took a quick look at Lucas' broken pinky finger and a vicious look appeared in his eyes. He stopped whistling and waited for a moment, as if he wanted Lucas to answer his earlier question. After a short moment, he let out an almost relieved sigh.

“This little piggy cried wee, wee, wee”, he growled with a deep voice, slightly touching the finger, which was already enough to force a pained wailing out of Lucas' throat. “All the way to the town”

The knife moved down, cutting into the flesh and Lucas started to shriek from the burning pain that flashed through his whole arm. “Make it stop!”, Lucas screamed. “MAKE IT STOP, PLEASE!”

With a triumphant look in his eyes, the Sphynx pulled the knife out of the finger, putting it in front of him onto the table. “Conor”, he said and the boy looked up, a truly sadistic grin on his face. “Yes, Sphynx?”, he asked in anticipation. The Sphynx slightly chuckled as he looked down on Lucas' marred hand. “Give me the pliers, we have a victor”, he growled and the sound of his voice sent shivers down Lucas' spine.

“This little piggy ends up on the plate”

With a gleeful smirk, Conor reached into the depths of the bag he was carrying, after a while he moved his hand out of it, revealing rusty pliers. It had to be rust on them, right? Lucas started to breathe faster as the thought of feeling this pain again nearly caused him to cry. The Sphynx and Conor exchanged a look as the masked man gave the boy a handwave, commanding him to walk closer.

“Conor, do you know why this particular little piggy caused so much pain to our valiant knight?”, the Sphynx asked and the boy took a long look at the finger. “It's broken”, he deduced and the Sphynx gave him an impressed nod. “Quite viciously on top”, Conor continued. “I guess Maron couldn't contain himself”

The Sphynx gave him another nod. “Very good, Conor. You truly deserve a reward”, he complimented him and to Lucas' horror, he handed him the pliers. The boy flashed the masked man a smile, before grabbing them, immediately moving them towards Lucas' wounded hand. “Stop!”, the Sphynx commanded sternly, just before the rusty metal touched the broken finger. “Do it as I have shown you”

Conor let out an annoyed sigh and rolled his eyes, but still complied, softly moving the pliers towards the fingernail of Lucas' broken pinky finger. The moment the cold metal touched his finger, Lucas moaned in pain, already expecting and fearing what would follow. The Sphynx put a hand on Conor's forearm, causing the boy to shoot him a nearly beast-like glare.

“One more moment, Conor. I want to talk to Lucas before you can continue”, the torturer explained, looking at Lucas and studying him for a moment. “You have a low pain threshold and that is a bad thing in your situation”, he stated. “The young Conor is unskilled when it comes to the removal of fingernails. His lack of skill, paired with his natural talent will cause the most exquisite pain you can imagine, I promise you that. But since I am your friend, I'd like to offer you a chance to avoid this pain. Just answer my question, Lucas. Where is Dairon?”

[Stay Silent]

Torvin

"It's going to be the coastline for me", Torvin proclaimed, prompting Durren to grin widely at him. "For us, you mean!", the captain said and leant back, putting his feet back on the war table. Damon slightly narrowed his eyes at this sight, but gave Torvin a nod. "As you wish, Captain Breaker", he answered, the tone of his voice making it unable for Torvin to decide if he was pleased or displeased.

"It's going to be a feast. Stallhart and Breaker! Breaker and Stallhart!", Durren exclaimed.

"Sharpen the swords, sound the horns, for ten thousand peasants will run when they see our sails" "We know the deal. Hide your women, hide your sheep", Kyra added with slight annoyance, to which Durren flashed her a sly smile. If it weren't for the presence of her brother, he would have responded in some way, Torvin was sure of it. But casually joking around was almost impossible with the looming presence of Damon Greyjoy only a few feet away.

"This would be all for the night", he whispered and Simon Vessels gave him an irritated look.

"Lord Captain, we haven't yet spoken about my son's...", he started to say, but was cut off by Damon looking at him. "This would be all for the night, Captain Vessels", he repeated calmly, but intense enough for Simon to gulp. "I wish you a good night, Captains", Damon added. "You may leave the room. Kyra, you stay!"

Kyra gave him a mildly surprised look, while Torvin, Durren, Simon and Alynne raised from their seats. She stayed back, while the captains left the room. At least in Torvin's case, he was glad to leave the presence of the Lord Captain. On most days, Damon Greyjoy was an affable and polite man, likeable even in a certain sort of way. But after a day spent in the company of Harmund and Harlan Hoare, every word the man said seemed to be a subtle threat in Torvin's tired eyes. Yes, he really needed a bit of sleep...

His thoughts were cut short as Durren patted him on the back, as soon as the four captains had reached the nightly courtyard. "You did a good choice, Torvin", he complimented him. "Always knew you had it in you. This is going to be a feast!" Alynne slightly shook her head. "This is going to be a lot of hard work. Two longships against the power of the whole Northern Rock?", she interjected.

Durren smirked as he thought about her remark. "What power of the Northern Rock are we talking about?", he asked. "The main fleet is in Lannisport, in the west. Greyjoy will burn it to the ground when he seizes the town and Casterly Rock. What house do we have near the northern coast?"

"House Estren of Wyndhall and House Banefort of the Banefort", Alynne answered immediately and Durren gave her a nod. "Aye. Estren and Banefort, the only houses with any kind of influence up there. Estren has no real fleet and we're gone until they are ready. And I have no

intention of getting anywhere near the bloody Banefort. So, tell me again, why is this a lot of hard work?"

"Because of your massive ego", Simon growled, without even looking at Durren. On good days, Simon Vessels was barely tolerable. Today, he apparently had a very bad day and Durren was smart enough not to respond to the insult. Instead, Alynne cleared her throat, earning herself a glare from Simon. "Your ego is pretty massive too, Vessels, for someone who just insulted the Lord Captain's sister", she answered.

For a moment, Torvin expected Simon to yell at her. The captain took a step closer towards Alynne, narrowing his eyes and shooting a glare at her. "You think I will waste any more words to a little turncoat riverlady?", he growled. "You can change your clothes and your manners, your titles and your gods, but you can never change your true nature, *Lady Hollard*"

Alynne opened her mouth, looking clearly hurt for a moment, before closing it again. Simon did not react to her, instead he looked at Torvin and Durren. "I'm going to call it an early night", he said and gave them a nod. "Torvin, Durren" Both reciprocated the nod. "Simon", Torvin said and the other man turned around, walking towards the captain's tower, on the southern side of Harrenhal.

Durren let out a sigh. "That guy can really get on my nerves", he snarled. "Guess I'm going to call it an early night too. Torvin, we're going to talk about that raid soon" Without another word, he started to walk after Simon, leaving Torvin and Alynne behind.

"You alright?", Torvin asked, taking a glance at Alynne's genuinely shocked face. She seemed to notice his stare, quickly regaining her composure and giving him a genuinely irritated glance.

"Of course I am, Torvin", she hissed. "If I couldn't handle an asshole like Simon Vessels, I should have never joined the army" She let out a sigh. "It's just... Lady Hollard. No one had called me by that name for a very long time"

"Captain Hollard sounds a lot better", a female voice from the tower behind them interjected.

Torvin and Alynne looked up, seeing Kyra Greyjoy walking down the steps. In the cold light of the moon, the Young Kraken of Pyke looked almost otherworldly pale, but her smile somehow managed to shine bright despite the darkness.

Both captains respectfully bowed their heads and Kyra let out a sigh. "As much as I hate to interrupt your talk, I need to talk to Captain Breaker", she explained. "Alone" Alynne pressed her lips together, visibly not entirely unhappy about the interruption. "There was nothing left to say either way", she answered, turning towards the captain's tower. "See you around, Torvin"

With these words, she started to walk away, while Torvin and Kyra looked at each other. "So, what is this about, Lady Kyra?", Torvin asked, earning himself a glare from her. "Torvin, if you call me 'Lady Kyra' one more time, I'm going to make a necklace out of your balls", she said toneless and Torvin had no doubt that it wasn't an idle threat.

“Old habits die hard. I'm sorry, Captain Kyra”, he answered and her smile returned. She pointed at the walls, giving him a sign to follow. “Walk a while with me, Torvin”, she ordered him and he obeyed too gladly. It was never boring in Kyra Greyjoy's company and even though he never fancied her like many of the other captains did, he appreciated her as a friend.

The two walked over the courtyard in silence and Torvin noticed that Kyra took less than subtle glances towards the king's tower. Torvin couldn't help but to wonder the reason for her secrecy. They climbed the narrow stairs that lead towards the top of the walls, soon reaching dizzying heights. Once again, Torvin realized how monstrously huge this castle was, as soon as they had reached the top of the wall. From down there, he could almost see the southern shore of the God's Eye, at least a hundred miles away.

“What you did today was kind”, he remarked, still looking down the breathtaking height. “About Simon Vessels, I mean” Kyra seemed to be unfazed by the view, instead she still looked towards the top of the king's tower, far above them, touching the clouds.

“Simon is a fool and an obnoxious one on top”, she answered. “He would have gotten away with insulting me, if it weren't for my brother” She closed her eyes for a moment. “Damon would have punished him in a draconic way, for such a simple word. Simon is a real son of a bitch, but he wouldn't have deserved this”

“As I said, it was kind of you”, Torvin repeated and noticed that she slightly smirked. “Not entirely selfless from me”, she admitted. “Next time I need help with anything, I can count on him. Simon has many flaws, but a lack of loyalty is not among them” She sighed as her smirk vanished, replaced by a stern look. “You're asking yourself why I have brought you here”, she said slowly. Before Torvin could give her the nod she expected, she continued. “Damon was surprised by your choice. I mean, raiding the coast with Durren Sheepfucker? You always appeared to be someone who'd like to get closer to the king”, she explained and Torvin understood. So that's what this was about. The Lord Captain got suspicious of him. He forced himself to smile at her. “Durren is a friend. Can't let him do that alone. I bet there will be more than enough chance to get a better standing with the king during this war”

This answer seemed to suffice for Kyra, who gave him a pleased nod. “Fair enough”, she answered. “I have heard you grew close to Harlan Hoare. Should I congratulate you or pity you?” Torvin slightly chuckled in a stilted way. What was it she wanted to hear from him? He realized, this wasn't the Laughing Kraken of Pyke talking to him, this was Damon Greyjoy's little sister.

“Both, I guess”, he answered, raising a smile on her face that vanished as quickly as it came. “May I ask how you managed to make such a... special friend?”, she asked. Torvin gulped as he noticed the look in her eyes. She wasn't only curious. She was interrogating him. For whom? Her brother?

“Gabin Strad, a common friend, introduced us”, he explained and Kyra gave him a knowing look. “Ah yes, Gabin Strad, from Lord Orkmont’s personal guard. I have never seen you two together before”, she answered and Torvin smiled at her, in the hopes that it didn’t look too desperate. “Have you watched me, Captain?”, he asked.

Kyra smirked and shook her head. “Not very well”, she admitted. “So, you’re friends with Gabin?” Torvin gave her a nod. “Met him a while ago. We got along instantly. He introduced me to Prince Harlan, in the hopes that a friendship with him could give me some profit”, he answered. Kyra playfully frowned at this remark. “That’s not nice of you, to use our dear little princeling like this”, she said and both had to chuckle for a moment.

“By the way, where’s your brother?”, she asked in an innocent tone, but Torvin immediately realized that this was the question she wanted to ask from the beginning of their conversation. “Captain?”, he asked and she closed her eyes for a moment, looking away from the king’s tower. “I haven’t seen Garthon for two weeks now. Is there anything wrong with him?”, she asked.

Torvin’s mind raced as he heard this question. It was clear, Kyra wouldn’t care about Garthon’s whereabouts. This was her brothers work. Damon Greyjoy, once banished for a decade, for nearly killing one of Harren’s sons. He was not a friend of the king. And he was influential, someone who might be able to help. Would he do that? Or would he sell them out to strengthen his own position? Perhaps he could confide in the Greyjoys. Torvin knew, he was a terrible liar and Kyra was good at spotting a lie. But there was a third choice, the choice Garthon would pick. Kyra had a healthy sense of humour. Perhaps he could be able to conceal the truth, to make it appear like a simple joke. His brother travelled to Maidenpool to meet a smuggler, to buy a poison, to kill the king. Oh, what an utterly terrible joke this was...

[Tell her the truth, but play it off as a joke]

Garthon

The gargantuan silhouette of Harrenhal was clearly visible in the distance, reminding Garthon of a mountain range. He slowed down his horse as the road in front of them forked, prompting his companions to do the same. For a moment, he looked down on the pouch on his belt, containing a ridiculously expensive vial filled to the brink with one of the deadliest poisons he ever heard of. Carefully tied to his horse hung the crossbow, a tiny, yet powerful thing. More and more, Garthon started to believe that they could succeed with their plot.

“It looks like we have to part ways here”, Jon said calmly, moving his horse next to Garthon. The Harper smiled lightly. “Me and my men won’t dare to go anywhere near this castle, not yet”, he explained. Garthon gave him a nod. “I understand, Jon”, he answered, his gaze still focussed on

the castle, brightly illuminated by the morning sun. For a moment, it almost looked as if it was on fire.

Behind them, Dacey and Jared moved their horses closer towards them and Garthon could almost hear George sighing. During their long journey back, the boy had made no move towards Dacey, despite the fact that even a blind man could see the way he looked at her. Garthon almost expected him to finally find the courage, but wasn't too surprised that the boy stayed silent.

"It has been an honour travelling with you, Garthon", Jon said, moving his gaze towards the castle. The look in his eyes hardened. "Make him pay for what he did", he growled. "I will", Garthon promised wholeheartedly. "Tomorrow, the tyrant will be dead"

"Or you will", Dacey remarked sullenly, earning herself a glare from Jon. She quickly rose her hands in an apologizing gesture, slightly shaking her head. "Don't meant to put it that way", she apologized. "You're not too bad, for an Ironborn and I wish you the best of luck. But killing the king?"

"Isn't it what your people have tried to achieve for years now?", Garthon asked, raising an eyebrow. Dacey gave him a nod. "Indeed, but we're not attacking him directly. A little cut here, a little cut there, until the tyrant will bleed out", she explained. "We're the drops of rain that together make a stream, a river, carving it's way through this occupied land, slowly washing away everything the tyrant ever built. We're not committing suicide by attacking him directly"

"It's not suicide", George remarked and Dacey looked surprised to hear his voice. The boy rode next to her and gave her a displeased look. "We can make it. Lord Tully has a plan" Dacey shook her head and Garthon noticed that she seemed to be a bit worried. Worried for them? "Lord Tully has a massive ego and like all men with a massive ego, he mistakes it for having a plan", she answered.

George gave her an angry glare, before moving his horse towards Garthon. "We're leaving. Lord Tully is waiting for us", he growled, before slowly riding down the street. Garthon looked at Jon and his rebels and slightly bowed his head. "Perhaps next time we'll meet under better circumstances", he remarked and Jon shook his head. "I doubt it. The best we can hope for will be changed circumstances", he said regretfully, turning his horse around. Jared followed him, while Dacey looked after George. Her gaze shortly met Garthon's eye and she forced herself to give him a smile. "Take good care of him, Garthon", she ordered. "He has a good heart and big dreams. Both is hard to come by these days"

Garthon gave her a promising nod, before starting to ride after George. He caught up to the boy after a few metres, noticing the frown on his face. "She mocked our plan", he growled and Garthon let out a sigh. "You know she likes you, don't you?", he asked. For a moment, George

gave him a surprised look, slightly blushing. "She does?", he asked with hope in his voice. "Has she told you?"

Garthon shook his head. "She didn't need to. It's obvious that she was worried for you", he explained. "Are you sure about Tully?" George's gaze hardened as he answered with a decisive nod. "I would die for him", he answered and Garthon suppressed the remark that this wasn't an answer to his question. He wasn't in the mood to argue with George right now.

"Where are we heading?", he asked as he noticed that George wasn't following the road to Harrenhal. The boy pointed to their right, where a thick forest was visible. "We're going to meet up with Tully and the others in there", he answered and Garthon narrowed his eyes. "The others? You mean Torvin and Gabin?"

George shook his head as he started to ride into the forrest. "The others who planned this together with Lord Tully. Petyr Blackwood, Tytos Bracken, Brandon Frey and Arrec Mallister", he revealed and Garthon spat on the ground as he heard this. "Four Riverlords?", he asked in disbelief. "I thought one of them would be bad enough, but now there are four more... I mean, I can understand Bloody Brandon. After what Harmund Hoare did to his daughter... But Mallister? The Iron Fleet is stationed at Seagard. If our plan fails, his city will burn to the ground. And how in the seven hells has Tully managed to put Blackwood and Bracken at the same table?"

"With diplomacy", George explained. "Lord Blackwood and Lord Bracken hate each other, but they hate the tyrant even more. However, they are seated at opposite ends of the table. Together with Lord Tully, Lord Frey and Lord Mallister they are the strongest among the Riverlords. Their help is needed for the things that will follow"

"The things that will follow?", Garthon asked, having a bad feeling about this term. "What are we talking about?" George pointed at his sword and looked at the silhouette of Harrenhal in the distance. "Harren Hoare will be the first step. Killing him will bring the Ironborn into disarray. It is possible that a new leader, either one of his sons or one of his captains, will try to take control over the army. Together, the five Riverlords can raise an army of ten thousand men with ease"

"So, you plan on marching to war?", Garthon asked and George gave him a nod. "We can't win our kingdom back without bloodshed. Harren Hoare has to die first, but we won't have a miraculous peace as soon as he stops breathing", the boy answered. Garthon gulped as he thought about what a war might bring for the Riverlands. "What about the other kings?"

Durrandon might be your main problem, but do you think Lannister or Stark would just sit there, watching a new and mighty kingdom rising from the ashes of the old?"

"Lord Tully has made plans for them as well", George explained. "But he should better tell you yourself. We're almost there" He pointed at a small building in the distance, barely visible through the trees. A small trail was leading up to it and Garthon had the impression that it wasn't more than an abandoned farmhouse. A small stable obviously held several horses and from the

smoke coming out of the chimney it was clear that a fire was burning inside. "Five Riverlords are meeting in this little building?", Garthon asked with suspicion in his voice. George gave him a short nod. "Indeed. A knight in Lord Bracken's service will be present too, to provide a bit of protection"

Just as he said this, the door of the building was opened, revealing a tall man who stepped outside, he was close to Torvin in height, at least a few inches taller than Garthon and a bit older as well. He had long brown hair, that fell upon his shoulders, paired with a short beard and hazel eyes. A scar went across his right eye and he frowned as he saw Garthon. He was wearing full armour, aside from the helmet and a tabard showing the red stallion of House Bracken.

The knight gave George a short look, but narrowed his eyes at Garthon. "George, it's good to see you back", he snarled. "This is the Ironborn?" Garthon did not like the way he said these words, but did not answer. It was clear that this wasn't a knight he wanted to annoy. This was a bodyguard of some sorts, a man who would kill him in an instant if he would see him as a threat to the Riverlords inside of this building.

"Yes, this is Garthon Breaker. Garthon, this is Ser Rickard Fowler, a knight in Lord Bracken's service", George explained. "The lords are already gathered?" Ser Rickard gave him a short nod and looked back at Garthon. "If you think I'm going to let you in there with your weapons, Ironborn...", he growled and put a hand at the hilt of the large two-handed sword he was wearing.

Garthon gave George a surprised look and the boy narrowed his eyes. "He is okay, Ser", he urged him, but the knight shook his head. "Let me decide this", Ser Rickard answered "Now, put your weapons on the ground, Ironborn, the crossbow, the sword and the knife on your belt, then I allow you to enter"

[Give up your weapons]

John

Gutten and Janae walked the path to the castle in an uncomfortable silence. The woman had an almost characteristic frown on her face, although this time it was clearly directed at him. Sure, this wasn't the first time she was angry at him, but this time it felt worse than ever, because this time he needed her friendship more than ever.

"Janae...", he mumbled and received a glare from her. He let out sigh. "I'm sorry" She slightly shook her head at this sentence, but stopped for a moment as her gaze fell on the barely healed cuts on his face. "Do you have any idea how much worse our situation just got?", she asked. "It was just a bit of money", Gutten tried to defend himself, but immediately noticed that he had said something bad. Temari had a similarly upset look on his face as John proclaimed that he

would give some of his money to Aylard. The only one who had been happy about this was Behara and her bright smile had almost been enough to make up for Janae's frown. Almost. "A bit of money...", Janae repeated toneless. "Are you out of your fucking mind, John?" He raised an eyebrow and pressed his lips together as he accidentally moved the cut flesh on his face. She still noticed it and her facial expression got slightly less hostile for a moment. "I don't have to explain our situation again, do I?", she asked, but continued before he could answer with a clueless look. "We arrive at our destination, a destination we invested quite some money to get to, but we only have half of our men with us. Temari needs at least another week of rest before we can trust him to hold his own in a fight. And you..."

Without warning, she gave him a somewhat hard punch in the stomach. It wasn't comparable to the ones he got from Bear, not even comparable to the ones he was used from Janae, but it was still enough to make him stagger backwards. She let out a sigh. "As expected, you are not okay. You are just the toughest son of a bitch I know", she said and Gutten wasn't sure if she just complimented him or not. "In any way, an experienced fighter would kill you with ease in your current shape"

John knew, she was right and he had to give her a reluctant nod. "This leaves me as the only fully capable member of our group, a group of six. The acting lord hired six of us, he gets one and two half", Janae continued sullenly. "It's quite likely that he will break out of the contract and I couldn't even blame him. Which would force us to find a new employer"

"We'll find something. We always do", John said, trying to sound optimistic, even though he felt worse than ever. It wasn't so much the absence of Cass which pained him, it was the absence of sadness, of real sadness. She had been important to him, even if he didn't know her very well. At least that was what he tried to tell himself. And now she was gone and while he was sad, this sadness felt superficial to him. It felt wrong.

"Something?", Janae asked mockingly. "In the deepest parts of the Reach? I don't want to travel to Oldtown, so this would force us to leave this kingdom" John gave her a short nod. Oldtown wasn't exactly his favourite place in Westeros either. They could return to the dornish marches... No, he quickly stopped thinking about this. The Marches were one of the worst places he ever visited. Hundreds of leagues, consisting of stony plains, moors, flat grasslands, the air coming out of the hottest corners of the Seven Hells, filled with marauding dornish fighters, ambushing anyone who dared to get too close to the dornish border without having the correct paperwork. He remembered the hostile tone between the Reach and the Stormlands, allies in name only, unified solely in their common hatred against the so-called dornish threat. And what a threat they had been... in some nights, Gutten still saw the long rows of hanged men and women, whose only crime had been that they were dornishmen. No, he would never return to this place.

"We could go back to the Free Cities. Pentos or Tyrosh", he suggested and Janae slowly shook her head. "John, after what you did today, we don't have enough money to return to the Free Cities. It was already bad that you gave Sammy the money, but today you gave away even more" Her gaze slightly hardened again, even though John saw the subtle hint of worry as she mentioned Samantha. "This is not the Free Cities, where things sort out somehow. Here, you have to plan if you want to survive"

John knew, this was what Janae had been doing all her life. Planning to survive. Born in slavery, forced to fight in the pits for all of her life, killed a dozen wise masters during her escape. Gutten was proud to admit that he participated in this last point. But even after she was free, Janae hadn't stopped planning her next steps. Things had been a bit easier for her and for him in the Free Cities, but ever since they returned to Westeros, his maiden fair was on the edge.

He let out a sigh and stopped walking. Janae continued for a moment, but stopped as he cleared his throat. "Janae, wait a moment", he urged her. She stopped and he put a hand on her shoulder, noticing how tensed up she was. She slightly shivered as she looked at him. "We're going to make it, just as always", he promised her and had the opinion that he even managed to convince her a little bit. Or perhaps he just managed to convince himself. Janae gave him a weak nod and slightly shook his hand off, continuing her way to the castle.

They arrived at the castle a few, uncomfortable minutes later. Other castles would have had at least half a dozen guards at their gates, especially at such a late hour. The castle of Raylansfair only had one guard, a young boy, probably only half as old as Gutten, perhaps even younger. He had olive skin and dark, curly hair. Despite his age, he was already almost as tall as Gutten, even though he was far thinner. Despite the late hour, he wasn't relaxing, instead he was standing guard in the truest sense of the word, with an eagerness that hinted at him being a very new guardsman.

"Stop right there""", he called and his voice made him sound slightly older than he really was. "Tell me your name and your reason to come here!" John slightly smirked at the sight of the enthusiastic boy and took a step forwards. "My name is John Gutten, I am a mercenary. This is Janae, my second-in-command", he introduced them. "Lord Harris Flowers is expecting us" The boy narrowed his eyes and seemed to think about this. "Lord Harris hasn't mentioned a John Gutten or a Janae when he told me about the people he was expecting. In fact, he does not wish to be disturbed at the moment", he said sternly and Janae let out an annoyed sigh. "Listen, boy, we haven't travelled through the whole kingdom just to get stopped by a badly informed guard", she growled. "Now let us in. We're willing to give up on our weapons, the whole usual procedure, but we really need to talk to Lord Harris"

The young guard shook his head, instead he looked at the spear that rested firmly in his hand. "I'm sorry, but I have clear orders not to..."", he started to say, before a new voice cut them off.

"Let them in, Federico", a woman behind him said. She wasn't much older than the guard, but something in the way she moved made Gutten realize that she was a lot more experienced. She was good-looking, with light brown hair that fell to her shoulders and eyes in the same colour, although Gutten could see that she hadn't slept for some time.

The young guard immediately stood attention and saluted in front of her. "Captain!", he greeted her with a respectful tone in his voice. The woman gave him a tired nod, before shifting her attention towards Gutten and Janae. "You are John Gutten?", she asked and Gutten gave her a nod. "Yes, m'lady", he confirmed. Instead of answering to him, the woman looked back at the young guard. "Federico, Lord Harris expects these people"

The guard's face got pale as he looked back at John. "Oh... I... I did not know that! I'm sorry, Ser!", he apologized and the woman let out a sigh. "You couldn't know it, because we expected them last week", she said with a sharp tone in her voice. Gutten gave her an apologizing smile, or at least it was meant to be apologizing. Her cold glare proved to him that he failed with showing this intention. "We had a few problems on our way", Janae explained and the woman shrugged slightly. "Lord Harris will want to hear your story. Frankly, I don't give a damn", she answered and yawned loudly.

"Long day, huh?", Janae remarked and the woman gave her a tired nod. "You can say that again. We have thirty unexpected visitors from Mander's Mouth here, assholes who act as if they own the damn place already. Lord Harris left it to me to entertain them" She let out a sigh and extended her hand, giving John and Janae a firm handshake. "Excuse my manners. Nora Rector, Captain of the guard. The boy next to me is Federico Snow, one of our newest guardsmen"

"Captain of the guard, huh?", Gutten remarked. "You're very young for such a position. How old are you?" Nora narrowed her eyes at this remark, glaring at him in a hostile way. "Nineteen", she hissed. "You got a problem with that?" Gutten raised both of his hands in surprise. Insulting her had not been his intention. "Not at all", he answered truthfully. "I was just a bit surprised. The youngest captain of the guard I ever met was ten years older. Well done, m'lady"

This seemed to calm her down a little bit again and she gave him a proud nod. "I have to thank Lord Harris for this promotion. And our current lack of better candidates", she answered with a grin, before looking at the young guard. "Federico, please escort these two to Lord Harris", she ordered him.

Federico gave her a surprised look. "Captain?", he asked. "What's with the gate?" Nora let out a sigh and leant against the castle wall. "I take care of the gate. I really need a break from Lord Hobert's men", she explained. "Go on, don't let him wait"

He saluted again and gave John and Janae a handwave, ordering them to follow him, while Nora leant back against the wall, yawning again and Gutten felt a bit of pity for her. Being a

captain of the guard in such a situation can never be easy, but her age certainly didn't help in making it any easier for her.

He shifted his attention back to Federico, who was walking next to them, leading them across the courtyard. Gutten heard loud laughter and the sound of music playing from one of the barracks. Federico followed his gaze and pointed at the building. "Lord Hobert's guards live there for now", he explained. "Lord Hobert?", Janae answered immediately. "What happened to Lord Harris?"

"Lord Hobert of Mander's Mouth", Federico explained quickly. "He thinks of himself as the rightful lord of Raylansfair and arrived yesterday, together with half of his guard" "You don't think he is right with his claim?", Janae asked and Federico shrugged. "I don't care who the lord will be. Robert Raylan, Harris Flowers, Hobert of Mander's Mouth. What does that mean for a common guardsman? I wish for a lord who brings stability to this town, a good lord, strong and just, but also kind"

"You probably also want him to shit gold, don't you?", Gutten asked with a light chuckle, causing Federico to glare at him. "Do you think it's funny to wish for a good lord?", he asked. Gutten shook his head. "Funny? No. Naive, maybe, but understandable. And not funny at all. Simply a bit unrealistic"

"Lord Robert had been a good lord, for all I know", Federico said. "At least that's what the others told me. I joined the guard under Lord Harris, never met the old lord" "So, your name is Federico Snow?", Gutten asked and the boy gave him a nod. "Quite a strange name for a Northerner"

"I hear that all of the time", Federico answered. "I am a Northerner from my father's side, but my mother was a dornishwoman and named me after her grandfather" For a moment, John caught Janae smirking at this explanation and he shot her a curious look. She raised an eyebrow and slightly grinned at him. "What? Reminds me of that stupid joke. What happens when a Northerner meets a dornishwoman?", she said and chuckled. As soon as she noticed that neither John nor Federico were smiling back at her, her usual frown returned. "Eh, you probably wouldn't get it either way", she growled and made it clear that the small talk was over.

Federico quickly lead them to a small tower, the only one this castle had. It was a broad tower, built to live in rather than to guard something. Before Federico could open the large door that lead inside, it was opened from the inside. A pale and thin young woman stepped out of the door. She had dark brown hair and eyes of the same colour and while she was pretty in a simple kind of way, a long, thin and fresh scar next to her left eye disfigured her face. The woman nearly recoiled the moment she saw them, looking at Gutten in an intimidated and scared way, but quickly seemed to calm down a bit. She stepped aside, making way for Federico and the mercenaries, before stepping out of the door behind them, quickly walking down the steps.

"Who was this odd girl?", John asked and a frown appeared on Federico's face. "Jenna Harking", he answered. "Servicemaids in the castle. Apparently she got attacked by some crazy killer only a few days ago" This sentence caused a frown not unlike Janae's to appear on John's face as he exchanged a glance with her. "Have they killed the man who did this?", he asked and Federico shook his head. "The city guard tries to find him, but I don't know how much I can expect from them", he explained.

"If he gets even near one of my people, he won't be a problem anymore", Gutten growled. "I will gut him with my own bare hands if necessary" "Only if I don't get him first", Janae remarked coldly. Federico slightly coughed, causing them to shift their attention back to him. "We're here", he said, pointing at a door in front of them. He slowly knocked at the door, not receiving an answer at first. Only as he raised his hand a second time, a deep, pleasant sounding voice sounded from the other side. "I heard you the first time", someone said from the inside. Federico lowered his hand again, instead pushing the door open.

The room behind him was warm, comfortable, with a fire burning in a fireplace and a man sitting in front of it, in a large armchair. He had brown hair and a bushy brown beard and his hands rested on his knees as he looked up. Green eyes glared at John and Janae. "Who do we have here, Federico?", he asked.

"Lord Harris, this is John Gutten and his second-in-command Janae, two mercenaries who claim to have business with you", Federico introduced them. For a moment, Harris just looked at them, before a light, tired smile appeared on his face. "Ah, finally...", he mumbled. "Come in" John and Janae stepped through the doorway and Federico closed the door behind them. For a moment, the mercenaries and the acting lord just looked at each other, a hint of disapproval seen on the man's face. "I have expected you last week", he finally said.

"We know and we are very sorry about this, mylord", Janae quickly said. "There have been complications during our journey" Harris took a glance at Gutten's scarred face and gave them a nod. "I can see that. What happened?"

"We have been attacked by a group of bandits, just a few days south of here", Janae explained and Harris let out a sigh. "Bandits near Raylansfair...", he mumbled, looking to the ground. "How much worse can this day get?" He quickly looked up again, directly at Janae. "Have they killed one of yours?", he asked. She shook her head, causing John to press his lips together.

"However, there is still a problem. Two of our men, Jaro and I'Lian have separated from us to follow a mission of their own. We have expected them back by now, but...", Janae started to explain, but Harris cut her off with a hand gesture. "Please, spare me the excuses", he growled.. She gave him a nod before continuing. "One of our men, Temari, he is badly wounded. He needs at least another week of rest before he can work with full capacity. Another one of our members, Samantha Ducard, left our group to pursue two of your knights to Oldtown"

This caused Harris' eyes to open wide. "Lucas and Leonard?", he asked and Janae gave him a nod. "What have they..." This time it was up to Janae to cut him off. "Took a girl from the inn we stayed at with them. Samantha tries to get her back to her father", she explained. Harris gave her a sullen nod. "They have a very important mission. I hope this Samantha won't stop them", he growled, before raising from his chair. "So, you're telling me I get half the men I expected?" Janae gave him an apologizing nod. "Mylord, we can understand if you want to break out of the contract", she said slowly, regretfully. Harris looked at her for a moment in silence, slowly raising an eyebrow. "And why should I do that?", he asked to Gutten's surprise.

"I mean, I can understand why you fear this. To be honest, under better circumstances, I would throw you out of my castle for this audacity", he said, albeit his voice sounded more tired than threatening. "Unfortunately, I am running out of options. I have hired you because of your reputation. You are loyal and you do a job without asking too many questions" A slight smile appeared on his face. "And I get you for half of the price"

Janae gave him a nod before Gutten could say anything. "That is acceptable, Lord Harris", she agreed. "Would you mind telling us why you have sent for us?" Harris gave her a pleased smile and started to walk towards his desk, commanding them to follow. Gutten saw a map lying on the table, a map which clearly showed Raylansfair and its surroundings. Several spots around the town were marked with circles. Harris pointed at one of these circles, the one that was closest to the forest.

"Tomard's Tower", he explained. "Built by Lord Tomard Raylan over five hundred years ago, destroyed by the Ironborn a hundred years ago, now nothing more than a ruined monument to one of House Raylan's more forgettable lords" He caught Gutten's curious look and smirked slightly. "I have stumbled upon an old document, detailing an interesting secret about the ruined tower. Something is buried beneath it"

"Something?", Janae asked and Harris gave her a nod. "I don't know exactly what it is, but the document I have found hinted at tons of gold which went missing from Raylansfair's vaults around the same time", he explained, catching Gutten's questioning stare. "Yes, I know more about the circumstances behind the disappearance of the gold. It wasn't stolen, but rather taken by Lord Merrett Raylan, probably to hide it from the Ironborn. A document I stumbled upon recently revealed its location, at least I have good reason to think so. Tomard's Tower, a place Lord Merrett had been obsessed"

"So, you want us to excavate this treasure?", John asked. "Indeed", Harris confirmed. "I have chosen you specifically because you have a reputation to lose if you betray my trust. I am surrounded by enemies and the few who are undoubtedly loyal to me need to stay close to me. You on the other hand..."

"I think I understand your reasons, Lord Harris", Janae said. "So, when do you want us to do this?" She looked out of the window, where a few fading rays of sunlight were still visible. Soon, the night would gather. "As soon as possible, of course", Harris answered. "I leave it up to you if you want to try it tonight, but I need this treasure tomorrow at latest. I need the gold in the things to come"

[Try to excavate the treasure tonight]

Drent

Drent took a deep breath as he looked into Argella's deep blue eyes. "It is Garen", he revealed. "He repeatedly stated that he is displeased with the way you handle things here, my princess" Argella raised her eyebrows, looking slightly surprised at this reveal. "Garen?", she asked. "This is unexpected. I never thought a mercenary would have an opinion at all" She leant forward, slightly smiling at him. "Thank you for your honesty, Drent. I appreciate it. Would you like some more wine?"

Drent gave her a slight nod and allowed to show the hint of a smile. "It would be a pleasure, my princess", he answered. Argella looked at the carafe and it took Drent a moment to realize that she had no intentions of pouring him another glass herself. "You know what... keep the carafe. Arbor White... not exactly my favourite", the princess said.

"Mine neither", Drent agreed. "Arbor Red is clearly the best wine in this world" Argella gave him a slightly impressed look, followed by a slow nod. "My, my, Drent. I never thought of you as a wine expert", she complimented him. Drent gave her a nervous, but proud smile and slightly chuckled. "Oh, you know, my princess... every man needs a few pleasures in life. One of mine just happens to be wine"

Argella's impressed look faded, her smirk starting to appear a bit mocking. "Actually, I still don't think of you as a wine expert", she revealed and Drent's smile vanished. "Everyone knows that Arbor Gold is superior to Red in any way imaginable" "Never drank Gold before", Drent admitted sheepishly. "Too expensive"

"That sounds terrible", Argella said and Drent wasn't sure if she was making fun of him or if she was genuinely sympathetic. "You know what... once we're back in Storm's End, I shall give you a cask full of Arbor Gold, as a reward for your loyalty" This caused Drent's mouth to fall open. "A full cask?", he asked and she gave him a mildly annoyed nod. "That's what I said", she answered. "But... but that costs...", he stuttered, before she cut him off. "Exactly nothing that would matter to me. It's just a reward for a loyal soldier", she said. "Now, back to our earlier topic. Garen... do you know where he is at the moment?"

Drent shook his head. "Somewhere here at the camp. We had a small argument and he stormed off", he answered. Argella pressed her lips together, apparently thinking about

something for a moment. "This is unfortunate. I would have liked to talk to him", she answered. "Talked?", Drent asked and noticed too late that he said this out loud.

The Storm Princess' glare got slightly harder as she gave him a stern nod. "Talked", she confirmed with a cold tone in her voice. Her anger seemed to be gone in an instant, as she let out a sigh. "Drent, what do you expect me to do?", she asked and looked genuinely upset.

"I... my princess, I honestly don't know what you would do", he answered and she gave him a nod. "No, you obviously don't", she hissed. "But that was not an answer to my question. What do you expect me to do?"

"I... I don't know... I still remember the ambassador", he uttered and her face darkened. "This impertinent swine got what he deserved", she growled. "But regardless, what happened to him wasn't my doing, right? Personally, I would have settled for a less permanent humiliation. As for Garen... do you think I intend to punish him for speaking against me in a private moment?"

"I don't know, my princess", Drent answered truthfully. The cold glare in her eyes faded, as she gave him a forgiving look. "Relax, Drent, this is an order. I have no intention of punishing him", she said softly. "Perhaps I'll remove an eye or two if he continues to say such things..." The moment, she noticed Drent's shocked facial expression, Argella started to laugh brightly. "This was a joke, Drent. In Storm's End a legion of servants would laugh right now", she explained with a bright grin. "I find your honesty refreshing"

"So you have no intention of punishing Garen?", Drent asked, still completely baffled. Argella decisively shook her head. "How much clearer do I have to get? He can say whatever he wants as long as he follows my orders", she said. "The gods gave him a tongue and it is his right to use it. I may have the blood of gods in my veins, but I don't intend to take it away from him"

"Then what are you going to do to him?", Drent asked, noticing that he was way out of line. But now it was too late and besides, she did not seem to mind his question. If anything, the Storm Princess looked more hurt than angry, even though it only seemed to be a hint of sadness. She looked him in the eye and sighed. "Please, try to look less disappointed at my lack of cruelty", she ordered him. "I would have talked to him, in a civilized manner. I would have asked for his advice. As long as he wouldn't stoop so low as Ambassador Celtigar did, there would be nothing to fear" Her gaze hardened as she looked back at Drent. "Garen was respectful, wasn't he?", she asked him with a sharp tone in her voice.

Before Drent could answer, Argella let out a sigh. "So, he wasn't", she deduced and Drent gulped. What had he done to Garen? Sure, the mercenary wasn't exactly a friend, but he wouldn't deserve the Storm Princess' fury. The smile on her face looked slightly forced as she looked back at Drent. "I am afraid your opinion on me is completely wrong, Drent", she said. "You're thinking I would kill or mutilate any man who dares to speak against me, aren't you?"

Before Drent could give her a sheepish nod, she let out a frustrated groan. "Say nothing! I don't even blame you", she hissed and her facial expression started to get calmer again. "You know the opinion the other soldiers have about me, don't you?"

"I do, my princess", Drent admitted. "Not very well though, but I do. I am afraid that Garen's opinion is not an unpopular one. But, my princess, these men are loyal to you" "Loyalty", Argella muttered. "Do you know what loyalty is worth if I fail to win the hearts of my people? Even a man like Harren Hoare can inspire loyalty"

She raised from her chair, slowly walking towards the window, looking outside down on the camp her soldiers had made. "These men would die for me, not because they love me, but because they love my father", she said with a surprisingly thoughtful tone in her voice. "My father is hard as steel, a true king of the storm. But he is old and I am his only child out of four who reached adulthood. How can I be their queen if all they see in me is Argilac Durrandon's daughter?"

"You have a lot of time to find an answer for this, my princess", Drent said, trying to sound reassuring. Argella shook her head. "I won't remain a princess forever", she answered and Drent gave her a nod. "I would never claim to be a wise man. I don't understand much about politics. I couldn't draw our borders on a map, I have only rudimentary knowledge about history and I am best at following simple orders. But I know that a good queen should never stop asking these things... though, perhaps she should find wiser men to ask"

As he said this, a strange expression flashed across Argella's face. It took Drent a moment to realize that it was a genuine smile. For a moment, no trace of sarcasm, of arrogance or haughtiness was seen on her face. Instead, it was simple, refreshing joy. "You have spoken like a true wise man, Drent", the princess complimented him, before widely opening her eyes.

"That's it! I have an idea!", she chirped and her gaze hardened again. "Turn around"

"My princess?", Drent asked in surprise, but Argella already grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him to turn around in a surprisingly strong grip. "Turn around and look at the door. Concentrate at the door", she ordered him. Still puzzled by her behaviour, Drent looked over his shoulder, causing her to slightly shake her head. "Let me put it this way. Turn around before I allow it and, by the gods of wind and sea, I have to cut out your eyes", she hissed. After this sentence, Drent tried his best to concentrate on the door, while only hearing the Storm Princess moving behind him.

It took her only five minutes to finish whatever she was doing in the room behind him. "You can turn around now", Argella ordered him. "And a little help would be nice" As Drent turned around, he saw a bizarre sight. Argella's red dress lay on the floor, her boots next to it, any kind of jewelry she was wearing was lying on the table. Instead, she wore a simple, green dress, made out of rugged fabric, reminding him of a common smallfolk servicermaid. She apparently had a

few problems with her hair, trying to tie her long black mane into a simple bun. "Seven Hells, how hard can it be to tie my own hair? A handmaiden would be nice now, but unfortunately you are all I have", Argella muttered. "Don't look at me as if I'm the first woman you ever saw, help me!"

"My... my princess, what exactly are you doing?", Drent asked. Argella let out a sigh, while finally making a bit of progress with the bun, even without his help. "How can I be their queen if they are afraid to tell me what they truly think?", she asked. "Tonight, I will visit my soldiers. Not as their princess, but as a common servicermaid"

The thought itself was bizarre. Princess Argella Durrandon dressed as a common servicermaid. Drent had to admit that the clothes looked convincing, the hairstyle strikingly similar to the one commonly found with the smallfolk women in Storm's End. She even started to remove the hint of make-up she was wearing. But it did not change her aloof aura, the look in her eyes that told anyone who looked closely that this woman was used to order people around. Of course, if someone would ignore these things she could never change, he would only see a young servicermaid.

"My princess, are you sure that no one will recognize you?", he asked and Argella gave him a nod. "Emphryus and Jax will recognize me, hopefully. But the rest? You gave me a good advice tonight, now let me give you a good advice in return. Most men only see what they want to see. Do you think these tired and half-drunken men out there want to see their princess walking among them? No, all they will see is a young woman in her service who takes a walk through the camp with her companion"

"That would be you", she explained slowly, putting emphasis on each word as if she was talking to an imbecile. "What do you intend to achieve with this, my princess?", Drent asked and Argella flashed him a bright smile. "I want to find out what they think about me first-hand. I want to hear it from them", she explained. "Don't look at me like that, Drent! I'm sure it will be fun"

Before Drent could answer, Argella linked arms with him, slightly smirking at him. "Besides, I was told I can be quite charming. Surely I will get my answers in no time", she said. Yes, she would get her answers, Drent was sure of that. The only question was if she would like them. With these words, she started to walk towards the door, with Drent having no options but to walk next to her. The moment she opened the door, Ser Emphryus Dresfel, still standing in front of it, turned around. "Are you done already, Golt... what the hells?", the knight exclaimed, mustering Argella from head to toe. "My princess... what are you doing?", he asked.

"I'm going to have a bit of fun, Emphryus. Do you know the word? Three letters, starts with an 'f'", the princess answered and Emphryus gave her a frown. "And I do not mean your kind of fun. I don't intend to charge into battle with these... rags" Her smile vanished. "Seven Hells, I hope there are no lice in them"

"My princess, I have to protest against your intentions. Going out there without me on your side is not safe", Emphryus protested, but Argella slightly shook her head. "My dear Emphryus, I won't be in any danger, I can assure you this"

The knight gave her a reluctant nod, before glaring at Drent. In a single movement, he grabbed him at the throat, slightly pulling him closer. "Golton, keep an eye on her", he growled. "If something happens to her during your watch, the Storm King won't be your biggest problem anymore" He let go of him, just enough so that Drent could give him a hasty nod. "Of course, Ser Emphryus", he swore, knowing fully well that Dresfel never made idle threats.

With audibly grinding teeth, the knight stepped aside, looking sternly at Argella. "You can continue, my princess", he growled. Argella raised an eyebrow as she walked past him, provocatively slow. "Oh, look Drent, we got his allowance", she chirped mockingly. "Isn't this a blessed occasion, when Ser Emphryus Dresfel allows the Storm Princess to walk past him?" Drent could almost hear Emphryus' frown and had to chuckle slightly. Argella glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes and put a happy smirk on her face. "See, Drent? I told you it would be enjoyable", she said as they walked out into the cold night. Drent had to agree with her earlier statement, outside of this tower, dressed like a smallfolk woman, she barely resembled the Storm Princess, at least as long as someone wouldn't look too closely at her. Then again, she still looked stunning. Many of the soldiers *would* look closely at her.

Of course, Argella did not even bother with this. Smiling brightly, she walked into the camp, still linked arms with Drent. To his surprise, while she managed to turn many heads, no one seemed to recognize her, while Argella made no attempts of talking to someone, at least initially. Just as they strolled past a few empty tents, Drent heard a familiar voice and slightly rolled with his eyes as he recognized the man. "Golton! Drent Golton! Hey, wait a moment"

Drent and Argella stopped and slowly turned around. The man who was approaching them was younger than Drent, probably more in Argella's age. He was tall and undeniably good-looking, with a clean-shaven face and short light-brown hair. His clothes consisted of a simple light blue shirt and brown pants. "Torrence", he greeted him with a short nod. Yes, he knew Torrence Bernile. Calling him a friend would be too much, but he was at least better company than Garen and a familiar face among the soldiers. Drent knew him as hard to get along with, but still better than others he knew, if handled correctly.

"Saw you walking through the camp with your lovely companion", Torrence said, smiling at Argella. "And I though... damn, where did Golton find one that pretty?" "You're too kind", Argella said and the mocking tone in her voice was almost inaudible. "I know", Torrence said with a dashing smirk before glancing at Drent. "Drent, don't you want to introduce us?"

Drent gave him a short nod. "This is Torrence Bernile", he introduced the man. "A soldier in service of your fa... king. Exceptionally loyal towards the Stormlands and a huge supporter of

your... king" "Our king, Drent", Torrence corrected him. "You have spent too much time with that damn mercenary"

"Torrence, this is...", Drent started to say, before realizing that he and Argella had forgotten to talk about one important detail. "This is... a young servicemaid who is accompanying us on this mission. Her name is... Gelly?" *Seven Hells, he could feel her slowly murdering him with her glare!*

"Gelly", Torrence exclaimed, not even noticing her glare. By now, Drent was convinced that the other man had drunken at least a bit of wine. "A pretty name. Are you named after that flower?" Argella shook her head. "No", she said coldly.

"Shame", Torrence proclaimed. "It would fit to you. A beautiful flower for a beautiful girl. Say, how can it be that I have never seen you around in Storm's End?" Argella's cold glare slightly melted down, albeit Drent saw how much willpower it cost her. "Because I am mainly living in the upper floors of the tower", she explained with patience and Torrence gave her an impressed nod. "So you're the handmaiden for Lady Taniel? Or even for the Storm Princess?"

"I am closer to the princess", the Storm Princess answered, sending a casual glare towards Drent, who was absolutely unsure how to react in this situation. "Ah, I could have guessed that much. You look very similar, you know?", Torrence answered and Drent gave him a slightly surprised look. "Yes, I do hear that quite often", Argella answered, "Thanks a lot, Ser"

"Seven Hells, you got some manners, girl", Torrence complimented her. "And you actually look better than Argella, by far" Argella raised an eyebrow in slight curiosity. "Is that so?", she asked. Torrence gave her a short nod. "Aye. I mean, optically you have a lot in common. Your hair, your eyes... but you have this nice and friendly aura and this approachable smile" Yes, he was clearly pissed drunken. Her smile reminded Drent of a starving cat that laid eyes upon a mouse. Only a fool or a drunken man would call it 'approachable' and Torrence wasn't a fool. At least not more than others.

"Whereas Princess Argella always has this cold and remote look on her face. She wears her nose so high in the air that she fails to see the struggles of the smallfolk", Torrence continued and for the first time in their conversation, Argella seemed to listen to him with genuine interest. "That is... interesting", she remarked. "I have always seen her as kind and warm-hearted"

This sentence caused Torrence to laugh hard enough to make him ignore Argella's genuinely hurt facial expression. "Gelly, I don't know if we're talking about the same Argella Durrandon", he chuckled. "The one I'm talking about has all of King Argilac's less desirable traits and unfortunately none of his positive traits. She has a temper, is arrogant and spoiled. She has a terrible sense of humour and she does not care at all for people like us"

"That is not true!", Argella exclaimed, obviously louder than intended. Torrence shook his head.

"It's the truest thing I have ever said in my life", he proclaimed. "Her father though... that man

knows how to live, as you probably know” Argella's considerably hardened glare fell on him. “What do you mean?”, she slowly growled. Torrence did not notice the dangerous tone in her voice and continued with joy. “Ah, you know. Old King Argilac loves the servants and the servants love Old King Argilac”

“I seriously doubt he would ever do such a thing with me”, Argella hissed and Torrence gave her a grin. “Of course, honey. If you insist. You can admit it though, it's no shame” Argella shook her head again. “Tell me”, she snarled, her voice sounding highly irritated. “Do we know each other that you can make such assumptions about me?”

Torrence slightly shook his head and gently put an arm around her shoulder. Argella looked at it as if she was taking into consideration to rip it off with her bare hands. “Not yet, sweetie”, he said with a charming grin. “But I got a jug of wine in my tent and we can get to know each other a bit better” He looked at Drent and gave him an infuriating wink. “You don't need that douchebag over there. What do you say, honey?”

Following these words, Torrence made a serious mistake. His hand moved down and gave her a playful slap on the bum, before resting on her lower waist in an unseemly manner. Drent saw Argella tensing up, saw her fists clenching and saw the angry look in her eyes. And he noticed that he had his own fist clenched. Of course, starting a fight with Torrence would anger the other man greatly. But perhaps he would be more thankful if he would wake up the next day and still had both of his hands attached to his body. Of course, he saw a few other options he had to deal with this situation, but he had to make a decision quickly...

[Punch Torrence]

Richard

The only sound Richard heard was the sound of Philip sharpening his knife. His friend sat on a wooden chair inside of his small house close to Raylansfair's northern gate. Richard himself leant against the wall, his feet tapping restlessly, his eyes focused on the door. Despite their long friendship, he had never been to Philip's house before. As sociable as he was, Philip rarely invited people over, not even his closest friends. As such, Richard had high expectations to this place and was slightly disappointed when it turned out to be nothing more than a common small house. Three rooms, a large dining room, a small bedroom and an even smaller storeroom. Few personal items, nothing remarkable. It looked almost interchangeable and was a stark contrast to what he would have expected from Philip.

“Don't you think that knife is sharp enough?”, Richard asked to break the silence. It has only been half an hour since Urid and Jarow had left to get the Commander. But the sun was already going down and Richard grew impatient. With a bit of luck, this could end today.

Philip stopped sharpening his knife and looked up. His mismatched eyes, the left one blue, the right one green, looked at Richard with an uncharacteristically hollow stare. Of course, Richard had noticed that this whole case got to his friend more than expected. Philip had no family, at least none that Richard knew of and never talked about other relatives. But now that someone was threatening Richard's and Lyria's families, now that the time came closer where they would fight against this man, Philip seemed to be stressed, anxious and absolutely furious.

"Maybe...", Philip answered, moving his thumb across the knife. The blade slightly cut into the finger, causing a few drops of blood to flow out. Philip pressed his lips together in surprise, before slowly putting the knife onto the table. "Yes, I suppose it is", he mumbled. "I just want to make sure"

"Sure for what?", Richard asked. Philip let out a sigh, his gaze focussed onto the knife. "That it is ready to kill the men who did this to you and Jenna", he answered and the cold tone in his voice made Richard shiver. Of course, he had to expect getting into a fight soon, but the thought of it was still terrible. He wasn't a fighter, he was a farmer, Urid was a tailor and Philip helped out in the archive. The only one of them who had any kind of actual combat experience was Jarow and what he had seen had been enough to break him. Richard couldn't deny that he was nervous. Philip on the other hand wasn't nervous. If anything, he had a disturbing eagerness to take revenge on Wolfius and his companions.

"Philip, why are you doing this?", Richard asked. "I mean, why are you so eager to risk your life for us? Wolfius is not after you, he is after me and after Jenna and Lyria" Yes, Lyria... some part of him thought that she had been the only one with common sense in their group. She had called them crazy for attempting to fight against Wolfius themselves. Had tried to persuade them to just inform the city guard. And then she had left, with the intention of locking herself and Rosalie inside of her house until this was over. Perhaps Richard should have done the same. Getting Jenna and Alan back to the farm before barricading the whole building. Perhaps that would have been wise.

Philip looked up from the knife, back at Richard. "It's... complicated. You know I don't like to talk about myself...", he mumbled. "I have my reasons, let's leave it at that" Richard gave him a short nod. "You have experienced something like this before?", he asked and Philip slowly shook his head. "Not like this. It was worse", he revealed, before his gaze hardened. "I really don't want to talk about this now, Richard. Urid and Jarow can be back any second and we have to be ready. Have you sharpened your sword?" Richard gave him a short nod. "Did it in the morning", he said and Philip gave him a pleased nod. "Good. If I don't get to do it, do me a favour and ram it into the beasts belly", he growled.

Both men looked up as heavy footsteps sounded in front of the door. Only a moment later, it was swung open and Jarow walked in. The man had a confident smirk on his face and Richard

noticed that he had combed his long grey beard. He was wearing his old armour, which was in pitiable condition, paired with his sword. Unlike the armour, the blade was in perfect condition, even though the scabbard was missing. Behind him, Hackor Nathamer, commander of the city guard, entered the room. He had a stern look in his green eyes as he looked from Richard to Philip. Urid was the last man to enter the house. Unlike Philip, he looked afraid about the prospect of fighting. Richard knew, Urid had the most to lose. His wife. Three children. The fact that he still refused to leave showed Richard once more how loyal his friend was.

“So...”, Nathamer broke the silence, walking up to the table. “One thing has to be clear: It has been a long day for me. Mysterious killer groups aren't even the worst threat I have to deal with these days, so I hope it will be worth to follow your leads “ With these words, he pulled out a small sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. Richard recognized a map of the town of Raylansfair. “I have a dozen men ready. I can't remove any more from their daily duties, the city guard is already short of good men. Jarow explained to me that you have the wish to fight too?” Philip gave him a quick nod. “It is the right thing to do. You're going to need every man if you want to have a chance against these people”, he explained. Nathamer pressed his lips together and seemed to be reluctant to agree. “Under any other circumstance, I would order you to stay home. This is my duty, not yours”, the commander growled. “But unfortunately, you are right. I will need every man and you four are at least able-bodied. You should suffice”

The Lord of the Bridges gave him a proud nod. “Indeed, Commander. It is an honour to help a neighbouring house out of trouble”, he said sternly. Nathamer just sighed with slight annoyance and forced himself to smile at the madman. “And we are thankful for your help, Lord Jarow”, he pressed through his teeth, before looking back at Richard.

“Harking, isn't it?”, he asked and Richard gave him a nod. For a moment, Nathamer seemed to be impressed. “It's good that you're still alive”, he complimented him. “Anyway, our plan is simple. With a dozen men, we can attack the warehouse from several angles” He pointed at several places on the map, all around the building Richard recognized from earlier. “Three men from the neighbouring roof. Two men to block the alleyway behind the warehouse. Five through the main gate. The final two together with me through the back-entrance.

“And where are we supposed to be?”, Urid asked and Richard noticed his shaking voice. He couldn't hold it against him. Urid should be at home now, caring for his newborn son, not out here fighting Richard's battles. But that was the nature of their friendship. He would do the same thing for Urid without hesitation.

Nathamer seemed to think about this for a moment. “I could need two of you with me through the back-entrance. The other two would accompany the men through the main gate. Arguably, this might be the more dangerous way, as they will expect an attack through there”, he explained. Richard looked at Philip for a moment, who had his eyes closed, then at Urid and

Jarow. And he knew what he had to do. "I'm going through the main gate", he proclaimed, causing Nathamer to look at him in a somewhat impressed way. "Going for the most dangerous position, huh? Are you sure you should do that in your condition?"

Richard gave him a short nod. "This is something I have to do, Commander", he explained.

"This is my battle and I won't let my friends take a risk I am not willing to take myself" "I'm coming with you!", Philip proclaimed, sending him a short glare. "I have to make sure that they won't hurt anyone ever again"

"Actually... I would volunteer", Urid said weakly. "This mission will help in keeping my family safe. I want to be at your side when we finish them, Richard" "No way!", Jarow's voice sounded.

"This is the most dangerous position, so it will be my task!"

Nathamer slightly raised an eyebrow as he looked at Richard. "It appears you have very loyal friends with you", he said. "That's why I'm going to leave the decision with you" Urid gave the commander an alarmed stare. "Can't we just... you know, all go through the main gate?", he asked. Nathamer shook his head. "I need two more men at the back-entrance. Aside from that, the main gate could be a trap. I don't want to send more men through it than necessary", he answered and looked back at Richard. "You know these men better than I do, that's why I'm leaving the decision to you"

Richard understood the commanders reason, but that did not change the fact that this was a hard decision. He looked around, at the three men who volunteered to fight for him. Two of them were his friends, the third man saved his life. And they all volunteered to go with him through the most dangerous spot. He knew, Jarow would be the safest choice for himself. The man was an experienced warrior, his insanity aside. But Jarow could also keep one of his friends safe at the back-entrance, while he himself could keep an eye on the other one at the main gate. And perhaps he would need to keep an eye on Philip. He was eager to kill those who threatened his friends, maybe too eager. And finally Urid... his family came to mind. Could Richard protect him when keeping him close? Or would he put him into additional danger? He looked up and gulped. Would this decision seal the fate of his friends?

[Allow Jarow to accompany you]

Willfred

Willfred looked up as his uncle sat down in front of him, putting a hot bowl of soup onto the table. "Eat something, boy", Roger urged him. "When was the last time you had a good meal?" Willfred gave him a thankful nod and pulled the bowl closer. "Three days, if you don't count that stinking bread I'lian bought back in the village"

"It was not stinking", I'lian protested. "Perhaps a bit hard, but..." "It was stinking", Jaro commented, looking up towards his brother. "And you are an idiot for paying such a high price to

that merchant" I'Lian slightly shook his head. "Was it overpriced? Yes, maybe. Does it make me an idiot for paying his price? Not really. He had five children, brother"

Jaro let out a sigh and gave him a reluctant nod. "Aye. Now he can buy stinking bread for them as well", he agreed and both brothers had to chuckle. Willfred in the meantime started to eat the hot soup Roger gave him and already felt the warmth filling his belly. It was late afternoon, but already quite cold. Winter was coming, even here in Raylansfair. It would only be a matter of months until the Citadel would send their ravens to announce the end of a long summer. Willfred had to shiver as his thoughts wandered to the hard winters in the northern Rock. Sure, it wasn't the North, but the Rock still had a lot of snow in the winter and it only got worse in its mountainous regions. Back at Castamere, his sister Alanna would be overjoyed about the snow and the thought of her laughing caused him to smirk for a short moment. His joyful expression faded the moment as he had to think about his father, who had to be stationed at the Golden Tooth at the moment. Even without the Iron Army at it's gates, the Tooth was among the least pleasant regions of the Rock, especially in the winter.

As if he had read his thoughts, Roger gave him a curious look. "Have you heard anything about Darren?", he asked. "I mean... has he said anything about me?" Willfred slightly shook his head. Oh, of course, his father had said a lot about his bastard brother, but none of it had been good. Irresponsible was one of the words that were heard the most. Envious of his position as a trueborn Reyne. Yet others, like Willfred's mother gave a more favourable view on Roger. "He hasn't said much", Willfred lied and Roger gave him a short nod. "If you say so", his uncle said slowly and let out a sigh. "But I am sure he has more important things to do either way. The Golden Tooth is a shitty place to fight the Iron Army"

"It's a shitty place to die, you mean", Willfred mumbled and Roger's face darkened. "That's not what I meant, boy", he answered. "Your father is an experienced commander and it's not as if he was tasked to defeat the Iron Fleet. Their land forces are far less dangerous, far less disciplined and most of them are conscripted Riverlanders"

Before he could continue, I'Lian made a surprised noise and gave his brother a pat on the back. "Jaro, if my eyes are not mistaken, that girl over there looks awfully similar to Behara", he said. Jaro looked up and for a moment, his frown turned into a surprised smile. "Seven Hells, that is Behara", he said and stood up from his chair. "Hara!", he yelled. "Behara Keys!"

Willfred followed the man's stare and saw a young woman, probably around his age looking up to them. She was cute, very cute actually, with light olive skin, dark brown hair and eyes of the same colour. As soon as she spotted Jaro, her eyes widened, first out of disbelief, then, paired with her wide smile, clearly out of joy. It only took her a moment to dart across the room, straight to their table. "Mother have mercy!", she exclaimed joyfully. "Jaro? I'Lian? What are you doing here? We expected you back at the Hammered Harp two weeks ago!"

With these words, she gave both brothers a warm hug, grinning widely. "Sorry for that", Jaro mumbled. "We have been... delayed" He looked at Roger for a short moment, before switching attention back to Behara. "Delayed...", the girls mumbled and her smile faded. "Behara, these men are Roger Hill, the bastard of Castamere and his nephew, Ser Willfred Reyne", Jaro introduced them, not paying attention to the frown that appeared on her face. "Roger, Willfred, this is Behara Keys, one of our closest friends and a member of the group me and my brother belong to"

"Delayed...", Behara hissed, before raising her hand, giving Jaro a hard slap on the cheek. "We have waited a whole week longer! Tem and John nearly got killed by some asshole just because we had to wait for you! Sammy has separated from us to chase after some knights, while we have been stuck in a remote inn for weeks and now you have the guts to tell me that you have been 'delayed'!", she spat into his face. She was at least two heads shorter than the tall mercenary, but right now she was absolutely towering him.

Instead of Jaro, I'Lian answered, by gently putting a hand on her shoulder. "Hara...", he mumbled. "What you just told us sounds terrible, but we should talk about this calmly and in private. We had our reasons for not catching up with you sooner and we are both deeply sorry about this. Please, just let us talk about this", he said calmly and Willfred noticed that the girl was slightly shivering. She gave him a nod. "Yes...", she said and Willfred saw tears forming in her eyes. "Yes, I know. Sorry. It's just... Temari is in so much pain, he nearly died and John too, I..." I'Lian pulled her into a short hug, while looking at Willfred's uncle. "Roger, I am afraid me and Jaro have to leave you for now. It appears there is a lot we have to talk about"

Roger gave him a decisive nod and immediately raised from the table. "Of course, my friend", he said. "You take the table. Me and Willfred, we can wait outside" He looked at Willfred, who just finished his meal and already stood up from his chair as well. "Come on, boy", Roger said, looking at Jaro and I'Lian. "I hope that won't be the end for us, friends. I assume you are going to rejoin your old company now?"

Jaro shrugged indecisively, looking at his brother, who was still holding the young woman in his arms. "Probably. Obviously, a lot happened. We're going to talk to Behara first before making a decision", he explained. Roger gave them a nod, before walking towards the door of the tavern, taking Willfred with him.

As soon as they stepped outside into the cold afternoon, Roger let out a sigh, leaning against the wall of the tavern. "Darren must really hate me", he remarked, causing Willfred to look up in surprise. "Father does not hate you", he argued, but noticed that he failed to convince his uncle. "It's just... what exactly happened between you two?" Roger slightly shook his head. "It's a long story, Willfred. We both said things we can't be proud of. I would be open for a reconciliation, but

your father... Willfred, your father is the proudest man I know and he can hold a grudge for decades if necessary. I don't think we will reconcile in this lifetime"

He looked up and past Willfred, his face forming a relieved smile. "But I am afraid we won't have the time to talk about this now", he said and pointed at a figure in the distance. Willfred followed his gaze and saw Vashord Tallian approaching. The general had been gone for a few hours, trying to gain a bit of information about the situation in the city.

"Vashord, it's good to see you", Roger greeted him and Tallian stopped in front of them, breathing heavily. He was wearing a heavy fur coat, which kept him warm of course, but also obviously exhausted him during his walk through the city. "What have you found out, general?", Willfred asked sternly, slightly annoyed that Roger found a way to avoid the conversation. His father was just the same, always trying to change the topic as soon as someone started to talk about his brother.

"The situation might be more complicated that we thought", Tallian started to explain. "The acting lord, this Harris Flowers, he is exactly the same man who refused to send the troops we need the first time. Convincing him might be a bit of work. Might even be impossible"

"So, what do you suggest?", Willfred asked and Tallian gave him an approving smirk. "My advice would be to ask the other lord", he said and slightly chuckled as Roger and Willfred looked at him completely dumbfounded. "Mylords, Harris Flowers might be the one who has the power for now, but he is not the rightful heir of Lord Raylan. He will remain lord as long as no successor has been named by King Mern. I say, we speak directly with the man who will be the lord as soon as Gardener finally found the time to move his royal ass to this city"

"Is this man here in Raylansfair?", Willfred asked and Tallian gave him a nod. "Aye, Ser Willfred. His name is Hobert, the lord of Mander's Mouth. He moved here and already acts as if he owns the place. If we recognize him as the lord now, it could win us his favour later as soon as he actually has the power to send us our men"

"Risky move", Roger interjected and Tallian frowned as he heard these words. "I mean, are you sure that this Hobert is going to be the lord of Raylansfair when everything is over? Perhaps we waste our time with him. We should try our luck with Harris. If there is already a contender for his position here, he stands with his back to the wall. He could need the support of the Rock in this situation, which in turn would give us his favour and his troops, right now, even before Mern Gardener makes a decision"

Tallian shook his head. "Stupid idea, Roger", he remarked. "Harris refused us the first time. Who says that he will help us the second time?" He looked at Willfred. "But aside from that, it's not our decision to make. Ser Willfred, what do you think? Which lord shall we talk to?"

[Talk to Lord Hobert]

Samantha

For a moment, Samantha just stared deeply into Jaylon's sullen, brown eyes. Her hatred stood against his infuriating indifference. She wanted nothing more than to bury her hatchet deep in his skull. She knew, he would deserve it, after what he did. Lunett's corpse came to mind and it was nearly enough to cause her to attack him, despite better judgement. But it was also the memory of Lunett's corpse that finally convinced her to lower her weapons. Lucas Flowers was still out there. What would prevent him from suffering the same fate as long as he was in this city?

"We have a deal", she hissed and Jaylon had enough courtesy not to grin at her. She wasn't too sure if she would have been able to keep calm if he would have done that. Instead, the man simply dropped his sword in the floor and took a step forward, moving a hand to his belt. He stopped as Samantha raised his hatchet again, before he slowly moved his hands away from his belt, revealing iron handcuffs. "You can handcuff me if you want", he offered and she shook her head. "Do it yourself. I'm not getting near you as long as you can move your hands"

Jaylon gave her a short nod, before starting to handcuff himself with experienced movement. "I have the key in my pocket", he said. "I'll get it later", Samantha answered, before making room for him to walk past her. "You go ahead, I follow shortly after you. Start to run and I will break both of your feet. Try to attack me and I will break both of your hands, do you understand?"

"Yes", Jaylon confirmed and started to slowly walk past her. "We're going back to where I ambushed you. Hopefully it won't take long until we find Sasha again", Samantha explained. "I can't wait", Jaylon muttered. "I'm sure she's going to be overjoyed to see me again"

"Jaylon, not even your mother could be overjoyed to see your ugly face again", Samantha mocked him and for a moment, Jaylon looked over his shoulder, anger in his eyes. "I will follow your rules, Samantha Ducard, but I have one rule myself. Do not talk about bad my mother. Never"

Samantha slightly chuckled at his anger, at the feeling of finally feeling in control of a situation for once. "Who would have guessed that the bad man loves his mother?", she grinned and Jaylon let out an angered sigh. "Do you think I wanted such a life?", he asked. "Working for Butterfly, killing every man he orders me to do? Do you think I seriously dreamt of this when I was younger?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it was so hard for you to take his money", Samantha spat. "But you can be relieved now. Butterfly is dead and you don't have to work for a monster anymore" Jaylon's angry glare changed to his usual confident look. "You know nothing", he said. "Absolutely nothing. As soon as we are in a safe place, I will explain everything to you"

Samantha narrowed her eyes as he said this. "What do you mean?", she asked. She half expected Jaylon to smirk, but the man just looked at her sullenly. "Do you honestly think it would

be that easy to kill Butterfly?”, he asked. Samantha stopped immediately, just staring at him, while he slowly continued to walk down the alleyway. “What...?”, she managed to stutter. “You will get your explanation, Samantha. Just not here”, Jaylon answered with a low voice. “It is not safe to talk about these things here”

And so they continued their way through Oldtown, Jaylon walking two good feet in front of her. Slowly, Samantha started to recognize some of the streets and alleyways they were passing through, even though she would have still been lost without Jaylon guiding her back to the place where she ambushed him. Getting help from Jaylon Gordus... the thought was absurd, almost insane.

To Samantha's surprise, Sasha waited for them where she left her, even though Leonard wasn't with her. She was leaning against a wall, slightly holding her side, where Jaylon kicked her. As soon as she saw him and Samantha, a frown appeared on her face. Samantha noticed that she still had her arakh drawn, casually resting it on her shoulder as she approached them.

“I see, you haven't killed the dog yet”, she greeted her and Samantha gave her a slight smile. “It's good to see you too, Sasha”, she said. For a moment, Sasha's frown turned into a smirk, but her facial expression darkened again, as Jaylon cleared his throat. The man took a mocking bow in front of her. “Sasha, it's good to see you. How do you feel?”, he asked with a grin. Sasha narrowed her eyes and without any kind of warning, her closed fist moved forwards, hitting him in the face and sending him to his knees, forcing him to howl out of surprising pain. “Better”, the woman growled.

Samantha looked down at Jaylon, who knelt on the ground, holding his mouth and sending glares to Sasha. “He asked a good question though”, she said. “How are you feeling?” Sasha seemed to force herself to smile at Samantha as she moved her hand away from her ribs. “Not too bad. Nothing is broken, although I took some nasty bruises out of this. It will hurt for a few days, but I should be fine. I've been through worse” She looked down at Jaylon, who started to get back to his feet, eyeing the deep gash on his face where her arakh cut him. “He on the other hand...” The hint of a smirk appeared on her face.

“Fuck you”, Jaylon mumbled without looking either of them in the eye. “It was an ugly face to begin with”, Sasha snarled. “You should thank me for cutting part of it off. It's honestly an improvement” Jaylon lowered his head and stayed silent, prompting Samantha to grin at Sasha. “Well done, now you managed to shut him up”, she complimented her, before raising an eyebrow. “Where's Leonard, by the way?”

“Brought him to someone I trust. It's not far from here”, Sasha answered and gave her a sign to follow. “A healer?”, Samantha asked and Sasha shook her head. “Not exactly. He should suffice though”, she answered “Most importantly, he is someone I can trust. He does not work for

Butterfly or Mullendore or the Burned Man. On top of that, he has experience with treating a wound. He's by no means a Maester, but hopefully good enough to save Leonard's life"

She stopped in front of a small entrance at the end of the alleyway, looking over her shoulder for a moment. "We're there", she said and knocked on the door. Samantha took a glance at Jaylon, who had his lips pressed together, looking truly upset. She would have felt pity for him under other circumstances. But now? He should be happy that she spared his life.

The door was opened, revealing a tall man, with a lean and athletic build. He had chocolate brown hair and icy blue eyes, with high cheekbones, a prominent chin and a slight stubble growing on his jaw. "Sasha", the man greeted her and gave Samantha and Jaylon a nod. "I see you brought more guests" He stepped aside, allowing Sasha, Samantha and Jaylon to enter the house. Samantha walked into a small, dark and dirty floor, following the man through it and through a second door, entering a small, but surprisingly tidy living room.

"One guest, one prisoner", Sasha clarified. "Davith, this is Samantha Ducard. She hired me, in some way. Samantha, this is Davith Lanser, one of the few honest people left in this city" The man extended her hand and gave Samantha a strong handshake. She slightly smirked at him. "So, you're suicidal?", she asked and half expected him to frown at her. Instead, he gave her a short nod. "And you're a loudmouth?", he asked in return. Both of them grinned at each other, before Sasha slightly clapped her hands, causing them to shift her attention back to her. "Glad you two get along. Davith, you won't like that other guy over here, but don't do anything stupid now. This man is Jaylon Gordus"

Davith narrowed his eyes and immediately, Samantha noticed something in them she knew just too well. She saw the same expression every time she looked into a mirror. And because of this, she managed to react in time, holding Davith back as he attempted to jump at Jaylon. "Easy now!", she growled, grabbing his shoulders and pushing him away from Jaylon.

"Are you out of your mind, Sasha?", Davith yelled at the woman. "Bringing one of Butterfly's men here?" Sasha raised her hands in defence, looking at Samantha for help. "Hey, it's not like I don't want to see him dead", she answered. "Gods know, this guy would deserve it"

"Do I?", Jaylon growled, still slowly backing away from Davith. "Well, then enlighten me, Sasha. What have I done that you and your new mercenary friend haven't done in the past too?"

Samantha slightly rolled with her eyes and before Sasha could answer, she put a hand on her shoulder. "Yeah, Jaylon... as much as I want to discuss this with you know, preferably by, you know, breaking all of your fingers, I don't have the time for it now", she said and looked at Davith. "Listen, Davith, I don't know what kind of problem you have with Jaylon, although I can fully understand you. But for now, I'm going to need him, alive and unharmed"

She looked around, from Davith, to Sasha, to Jaylon. "Okay, I want to make one thing clear. No one gets killed today, alright?", she explained and Davith gave her a reluctant nod. She

answered with a cheerful smile. "Great! Glad we talked about this. Now... where's Leonard?", she asked.

Davith let out a sigh and pointed at a small door, leading deeper into his part of the house. "I did what I could. Cleaned his wounds, stopped the bleeding, sewed his leg back together and bandaged it. Now he is resting and all we can hope for is that his wounds won't get infected", he explained and paused for a moment. "He told me he needs to talk to you. Even refused to drink the milk of the poppy to stay awake"

Samantha gave him an alarmed stare. "And is he still awake?", she asked, quickly walking towards the door. "He was last time I looked after him", Davith answered and walked after her, through the door that lead to his bedroom. The room itself was small and a fire was burning in a fireplace in its corner, leading to a comfortably warm atmosphere. The only furniture next to the fireplace was a cupboard and a small bed. Inside of this bed, Leonard was lying, slightly raising his head as he recognized Samantha. His leg was heavily bandaged, the bandages reddened with blood. Davith had removed the knight's armour and the heavy parts of his clothing and from the amount of blood that stained the sheets, it was clear that his help had saved Leonard's life.

"Hey", Leonard mumbled weakly and Samantha gave him a nod. "Hey", she greeted him back, walking next to him. "First, let me get one thing straight" She knelt next to him, so that she was able to look at him at eye level. "I am not your friend. Whatever special bond you had with that asshole Flowers, we two don't have it", she hissed and he gave her the hint of a nod. "I haven't chased after you through half of this kingdom because I was concerned for you, I did it for Lunett" The mention of the girl caused a pained facial expression to flash over his face.

Samantha knew, Leonard had seen the same sight, back at the inn. She pressed her lips together and blinked a tear away. "Lunett is dead and nothing can bring her back. I haven't rescued you from Jaylon out of the kindness of my heart, I have done it because you are going to give me some answers", she continued. Again, Leonard gave her a weak nod. "Understood", he mumbled.

Both looked up as Jaylon stumbled into the room, followed by Sasha, who was slightly pushing him. "Get in there, I want to hear this", she growled and Jaylon quickly stepped into the room, trying his best to stand as far away from Davith as possible.

"You left him alive", Leonard remarked and Samantha gave him a proud nod. Despite the pain he was in, a glad smile appeared on Leonard's face. "Then you did more than I would have done", he answered and glared at Jaylon. "You can be lucky that I am not feeling too well right now"

Jaylon shook his head, looking from Davith to Sasha. "Yeah, lucky...", he mumbled. Leonard moved his hand closer to Samantha, grabbing her forearm. "Listen...", he mumbled and was

interrupted by slight shivering as he barely moved his wounded leg. "The man who killed Lunett is Maron Mullendore"

For a moment, no one said a word. Davith and Sasha just stared at Leonard, in case of Sasha her mouth was wide open in shock. Jaylon looked to the ground, perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of shame. And Samantha raised an eyebrow in disbelief as she realized what he just said. "Maron Mullendore?", she asked. "Mullendore, the commander of the city guard? Jaylon's new boss? That pudgy ginger I saw back at the tavern?"

Jaylon slightly chuckled at that last remark, but a cold glare from Davith quickly shut him up. "Mullendore killed a random girl?", the man asked. Leonard shook his head and let out a sigh, half out of frustration, half out of pain. "Not a random girl. He killed our friend because he wanted to break us, me and Lucas. He wanted answers, wanted to know where Dairon is hiding" He paused for a moment, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. "Maron Mullendore is Butterfly"

Samantha narrowed her eyes and caught Sasha's surprised gasp. But the one who reacted by far the worst to these news was Davith. For a moment, the man just looked at Leonard in silence, before turning around and facing Jaylon. "You knew about this?", he growled. Jaylon gave him a weak nod. "A fifth of the guard knows about this", he answered. Davith said nothing. Instead, he turned around to Samantha and she saw how deeply shocked he was by this revelation. "Excuse me", he muttered, before slowly walking out of the room. Sasha gulped, before giving Samantha a short nod. "I'll handle this", she said and walked after Davith, leaving Samantha, Leonard and Jaylon alone in the room.

"Mullendore is Butterfly...", Samantha repeated. "He's the commander of the city guard and a crimelord as well... I have to say it is a brilliant disguise" She clenched her fists and looked to the ground. "Shit...", she mumbled. "This is bad. This is very, very bad" Her mind wandered off to the man in the warehouse, his desperate screams of agony. And she had already thought that she was free of Butterfly...

She looked up again, as Leonard's hand tightly squeezed her forearm. "Sam... listen", he mumbled with a weak voice and Samantha saw that he was struggling to stay conscious. Considering how much blood he had lost, it was a testimony to his determination that he even managed to stay awake for so long. She moved closer, so that she was able to understand him better. "I know you only wanted answers. You must hate me and Lucas for bringing Lunett here. And we fucked up, there is no other way to describe it", he whispered into her ear. "But Lucas, he is not a bad guy. In fact, he is one of the best I know. He does not deserve what Mullendore will do to him. And Dairon is in danger as well. The boy is innocent..." He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. "Please", he said a bit louder than before. "Don't leave them here. I have nothing to offer you, but I know you can't leave them behind"

Samantha looked deeply into his brown eyes and shook her head. "No, I can't", she agreed. "I will save both of them and then I will bring all three of you back to Raylansfair. I won't even judge you, Leonard. Her father will do this" The mention of Aylard caused another pained expression to appear on Leonard's face, but he gave her a nod. "That sounds fair. I won't run away from him. I failed to save his daughters life and I will face his judgement for it", he answered, before his head fell back onto the pillow. "Dairon... he is at the Citadel. He is with the Archmaester of Magic" Samantha got up from the ground and gave Jaylon a sign to leave the room. "I understand and I will try my best", she promised. "We will leave you now. You need to rest. In the meantime, we will go to the Citadel"

She walked towards the door, but was interrupted by Leonard answering her. "Thank you", he mumbled. "I know, you haven't saved my life because we're friends, but still... thank you for everything" Samantha forced herself to smile at him, even though she never felt so empty in all of her life before. "Don't mention it", she answered and walked out of the door, with Jaylon following her closely.

In the living room, she found Davith and Sasha sitting on chairs, with the woman sternly talking to the man, whose facial expression was a mixture of anger and sadness. Both looked up as Samantha walked closer. Without asking, she grabbed a chair and sat next to them. "So...", she began, looking at Davith. "Do you want to tell me what your problem with Butterfly is?"

Davith let out a sigh and gave her a nod. "I think it's only fair if you know. I was a member of the city guard. My father was a guardsman as well and the best man I ever knew", he explained and Samantha could already guess what would follow. "Butterfly killed him, just as he killed plenty of others. For a while, I continued to serve Mullendore, not knowing that I was serving..." He interrupted himself and clenched his teeth. "I left the city guard when it became apparent that Mullendore was focussing on the Burned Man instead. The Burned Man is not the one murdering our guards... to think that I served this monster..."

He slammed his fists down on the table and stared at Jaylon. "Why is he killing his own guards?", he asked and Jaylon almost looked apologetic. "To avoid suspicion. As I said, a fifth of the guard knows about his secret, most of them high-ranking officers. If someone finds out his secret, he gives them a choice. To serve Butterfly, or to die", the mercenary explained. "If it helps, your father died without betraying his moral principles"

"This does not help at all, you stinking son of a bitch", Davith growled and looked back at Samantha. "I want to help you. I want to help you in freeing the other knight and this boy Leonard talked about. I am one of the best fighters you can find in Oldtown"

"Which I can confirm", Sasha added. "We can definitely need him if things get rough" Samantha looked over her shoulder, towards the bedroom door. "And what's with Leonard?", she asked. "As I said, I did all I could for him. If his situation gets worse, I can't help him either way. If you

allow me to accompany you, I will ask my neighbour to look after him. She is an experienced midwife, certainly better suited to help Leonard if his condition deteriorates”, Davith answered. Samantha closed her eyes. She knew what Davith was feeling. She felt the same helpless rage inside of her ever since Butterfly's hound murdered her whole family. Yes, she could understand him and she could understand his reasoning. But there was another factor she needed to deal with. She opened her eyes again and looked at Jaylon.

“And what are we doing with him?”, she asked. Jaylon looked up, slightly shaking his head. “I'm not going with you”, he said and raised his hands. “Not because I want to refuse your orders, but because it is too dangerous. I am a captain of the city guard. Imagine what happens if people see me being dragged in chains towards the citadel”

“What if we remove your chains?”, Samantha asked, causing Sasha and Jaylon to look at her in surprise. “The hell we're going to do”, Sasha exclaimed. “Just leave him here, chained to the wall or something like that”

“That could be even more risky. If you take him with you, you need to remove his chains, but just leaving him here... what if he frees himself?”, Davith mumbled and looked at her. “Besides, what's with me? Can I accompany you at least?”

[Take both with you]

Ellena

Ellena gave Jarek a short nod. “You are right”, she answered. “I want to find out what the Burned Man knows about Terroma. I'm going to read the letter. I mean, what's the worst thing that can happen?” Jarek started to chuckle. “You shouldn't have said that, little lady”, he grinned. “Now something bad is guaranteed to happen”

She frowned at these words and shook her head. “And it already started. You're going to stand over there, far away from this letter when I read it”, she said and Jarek's smile faded. “I called it”, he moaned, but followed her order and started to move away from her. Ellena waited for a moment, to make sure that he wasn't spying on her, before pulling the letter out of her pocket. Even if she was incredibly curious, she knew at the same time that this wasn't right. The Burned Man trusted her with this, trusted her that she wouldn't look into it. For a moment, she hesitated, before slightly shrugging. Well, he was a crimelord after all. Surely, he almost expected such a thing. And if not, well, she did not feel too bad in betraying the trust of someone like him. With quick movement, she broke the seal on the document, looking at the letter. The Burned Man's handwriting was neat and tiny, written in perfect low valyrian. Her lips slightly moved in silence as she started to read.

First of all, I know who you are, Terroma, or by whatever name you like to go now. I haven't forgotten what you did last time you have been to my city and I certainly haven't forgiven. But many things have changed since we have parted and I do not wish to continue our quarrel. I have a new enemy now and if I am correct with my assumption about your identity, he is your enemy as well. You have killed three of his men, as I have heard, and I can promise you, he won't forget this. Unlike me, however, he will do anything to pursue his vengeance, I can promise you that

Without a doubt, you will recall the old proverb 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend'. I can almost hear you saying it and I am sorry to destroy your feeble illusions. We are no friends and we never will be. But I believe we should put our differences aside. I know why you are here, or at the very least I can imagine why you are here. I offer you my knowledge and in turn I expect that you won't meddle with my affairs again

The people you are looking for have crossed the Honeywine and entered Oldtown three months ago. The one that is of special interest to you has been with them, alive and unharmed. They have spent two months in Oldtown, doing some despicable wetwork, and left the city a month ago, taking the northern road to Highgarden. My eyes lost them at Honeyholt, but their trail shouldn't be cold yet

Do with this knowledge what you want. Go after them, if you have to, although you would need a fast horse to do that. I suggest leaving Oldtown soon, before their trail goes cold. If you plan to stay in my city, be warned that I will not tolerate you interfering with my plans again

Finally, be assured that I haven't told your little girl a thing about who you are and who you have been. I certainly haven't done it for your sake, but you should have seen the look in her eyes as she talked about you, refused to give up your location. I don't know what you have done to deserve such loyalty, but she loves you. Girls in her age need someone they can look up to, even if it means lying to them. I won't be the one to destroy her illusions about you. I am sure you will destroy it yourself, sooner or later, just as you always do, Old Man

Arkan Gorys

Ellena put down the letter, a confused look on her face. Jarek caught this look, noticing that she had finished reading and started to walk over to her, a friendly smile on his face. "Have you found what you were looking for?", he asked and tried to get a glimpse of the letters content. Ellena quickly snapped out of her confusion, putting a hand onto the document. "Nice try", she mumbled, barely paying attention.

"Do you want to tell me why you are so shocked?", Jarek asked and Ellena shook her head. "I'm not shocked", she answered. "I'm just... confused. What the Burned Man wrote makes no sense

to me. He wrote that Terroma lied to me about something, that he came to this city to look for someone”

“So you learned no real answers and only gained more questions”, Jarek concluded and Ellena gave him a nod. “Looks like it...”, she answered. Jarek gave her a sympathetic smile as he put a hand on her shoulder. “Was it worth it, little lady?”, he asked and she shook her head. “I am not sure what I think about Terroma now... I thought I know him”

“Sometimes, the ones we think we know the best have the most to hide”, Jarek answered, trying to comfort her. To her own surprise, Ellena noticed that tears were forming in her eyes. Irritated at this, she started to blink them away. Whatever the Burned Man just hinted at, Terroma was still her friend, wasn't he?

Careful not to let Jarek catch a glimpse of it, Ellena unwrapped the letter once more, reading it again. This time, she noticed something else, something that was almost stranger than the implications this letter gave her. “Jarek, I think the Burned Man signed the letter with his real name”, she mumbled.

Jarek looked up, his facial expression a mixture of surprise and disbelief. “No way!”, he exclaimed. “Come on, let me look at that blasted thing. You can't just tease something like this and then refuse to show it” Ellena shook her head once more and put the letter back into her pocket, which caused Jarek to sigh in frustration. “Arkan Gorys”, she revealed and Jarek's frustrated sigh turned into a doubtful gasp.

“Arkan Gorys?”, he asked again. “That's his real name? Seven Hells, I always suspected that he had a real name, I mean, his parents haven't named him 'Burned Man', right?” His half-hearted attempt at a joke failed to hide his surprise. “But Arkan Gorys? I expected him to be a Maegyr, or a Tagaros or a zo Loraq, coming from an influential noble family. But Gorys? That is so... common”

A small chuckle managed to find its way out of his throat, before it was cut off again. “Which opens up the question why he uses it in a letter to your friend. The only person I know about who knows his real name for sure is Harpy, but she is as close to him as a daughter”, he mumbled.

Before Ellena could answer, the sound of steel being drawn caused her to look towards the city. The Burned Man's guards, aside from Jarek, approached the railing, slowly as if they were afraid of something. Jarek got up on his feet before Ellena could do it and she saw him narrowing his eyes. “Seven fucking Hells...”, he growled. “Ellena, stay down. We got this!” He started to run towards his men and Ellena finally managed to get back to her feet, noticing what exactly this turmoil was about. Her eyes widened as she saw the man. His sword sheathed, but nonetheless threatening, Samuel Harrington slowly approached the ship in broad daylight.

"That is close enough!", Jarek yelled at him and Samuel stopped, his eyes wandering across the men. "Four men?", he asked. "The Burned Man dispatched four men? And you think this is enough to stop me?" He noticed Ellena slowly approaching the railing and raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, it's you again. Be a good girl and bring me the captain. I have to talk to him"

"The captain is not here", Ellena hissed. "I am. What do you want?" Samuel slightly chuckled as he put a hand on his sword. Four swords were unsheathed and pointed at him, which did not faze him in the slightest. "I came to reclaim something of mine", he answered slowly and to Ellena's surprise, he did not draw his sword, instead he removed the leathery sheath from his belt. "And I haven't approached you to fight"

Ellena took a step forwards and felt Jarek's hand on her shoulder. "Ellena, don't", he hissed, but she shook his hand off, taking another step towards Samuel. "I'm asking you again. What do you want?", she snarled.

Harrington let out a sigh and for a moment, he seemed to be less threatening. "Last time I was here, I lost something of great importance to me. A simple, golden ring", he explained. "And now I came to get it back, one way or the other. Listen, I don't want to turn this into a slaughter, but I am ready for it if you won't give me back what's mine"

"You came here for a simple ring?", Ellena asked. "You would provoke a fight over it?" Samuel gave her a brief nod. "I would", he answered. "Although I am willing to sort this out without violence. I am willing to give up my weapons, all of them. I am willing to allow your guards to escort me while I look for my ring"

Ellena narrowed her eyes, taking another step forwards. "What is so important with that damn ring?", she asked. Samuel glared at her, before giving her an answer. "This is none of your concern", he answered with a low voice and Ellena took a step back towards the ship again. "Then you won't set a foot on this ship", she decided.

Samuel's angry frown vanished, replaced by a sad look as he glanced down at the sheathed sword in his hand. "Wait!", he called her and let out a sigh. "This ring... it belonged to my little brother. It's all I have left of him. I would kill to get it back, but I would prefer if you would just agree to my terms. I give up my weapons and enter this ship guarded by your men. I will leave as soon as I found it and you won't see me again"

Ellena took a glance at Jarek, who slightly shook his head, his lips forming the word 'No'. She looked back at Samuel, who seemed to be determined to fight his way to the ship if necessary. Could these four men really keep him out? As much as she hated it to have him around her, she had to consider giving in to his terms.

[Allow Samuel to enter the ship]

Arthur

"Who goes there?", a tired voice called him and Arthur stopped immediately. The imposing walls of the castle hulked up in front of him and he knew, it was better to follow the castle guards orders immediately. "Arthur Nathamer, from the city guard!", he introduced himself, knowing fully well what the castle guard usually thought about the city guard. Begrudgingly, he had to admit that they weren't entirely wrong. Compared to the castle guard, hand-picked and trained by an experienced knight, the city guard gave a poor impression. Green boys, barely trained, mostly used to feign real power. In case of an Ironborn attack, they always needed the castle guard. Today, the gate guardian was a young woman with an admirably athletic figure. She had light brown hair that fell upon her shoulders and looked at him out of tired, brown eyes. "Nathamer...", she mumbled. "You're the commanders son?"

Arthur gave her a nod and she seemed to force herself to smile at him in a somewhat friendly way. "My name is Nora Rector, captain of the castle guard. What can I do for you, Arthur Nathamer?", she asked. "I wish to speak with Lord Harris", he answered and noticed a somewhat amused smirk on her face. "Looks like everyone wants to do this these days. Our poor acting lord is a busy man tonight", she chuckled and gave him a signal to enter the castle. "I'm sure he will be happy to talk to you"

Arthur raised an eyebrow as he looked back at her. "Who else wanted to talk to him today?", he asked. Nora thought about this for a moment. "There was this prick who claims to be the rightful lord, then came Jenna, the girl who got attacked by the killer a few days ago. Then we had two mercenaries just shortly afterwards and finally this young woman"

"Young woman?", Arthur asked and Nora gave him a nod. "A bit older than me, perhaps in your age. Very pretty. Brown hair, blue eyes, ample chest. Never seen her before, but Lord Harris personally came down to the gates to greet her, so she must be quite important"

"Is she still with him?", Arthur asked. "She is and she has been for the past two hours", Nora answered. "And more visitors are likely to come. I have heard that a delegation from the Rock and from the Vale has arrived here. Won't be long until Lord Harris has even more to do" She let out a yawn and pointed at the courtyard. "You better talk to him as long as they haven't arrived yet"

Arthur gave her a nod and turned around towards the courtyard, walking deeper into the castle. It certainly looked as if the acting lord had a lot to do these days. Arthur felt a bit of pity for him. He knew how much work his father had with the city guard and an acting lord was guaranteed to have even more work.

He knew the way to Lord Harris' chambers, from an earlier visit together with his father. It wasn't hard to memorize, at least not for him and it wasn't a very long way. He walked across the silent courtyard, towards the tower, climbed the narrow stairs that lead up to the tower, opened it's heavy door and took a step into the silent darkness behind it.

As soon as he had closed the door behind him, he had to correct himself. It was dark, yes, but it wasn't silent. He heard muffled noises... something that sounded like a woman moaning lustfully... he slowly climbed the stairs that lead up to Harris' chambers, as he realized what exactly these sounds were. Seven Hells, so that was why the lord was so 'busy'!

As much as he just wanted to turn around, leaving Harris and the woman alone, Arthur knew he couldn't wait. His father had made his case clear. He needed the men from the castle guard to attack this warehouse, to bring those to justice who killed some of Raylansfair's people. Sternly, he knocked on the door that lead to Harris' chambers.

The lustful moaning stopped immediately, followed by a muffled curse. "There's someone at the door, Harris...", a woman whispered, apparently unaware that Arthur was able to hear them through the door. "I know", a deeper voice answered. "Please wait a moment!"

About a minute later, heavy footsteps were heard and someone approached the door, unlocking it from the inside. The door opened a tiny crack and Arthur saw the annoyed face of Harris Flowers looking at him, before it was opened completely. To Arthur's relief, Harris had used the time to put on some clothes, plain brown trousers and a white vest, even though it was clear that he had put them on hastily. Behind him, on the bed, sat a young woman, perhaps in Arthur's age. She was exactly as Nora had described her, very pretty with brown hair and blue eyes. Her dark robe hinted at a breathtaking body underneath it.

"Who are you?", Harris demanded to know, clearly frustrated at the disturbance. Arthur moved his eyes away from the woman and back to Harris, finally realizing that he was talking to the acting lord of Raylansfair. He stood attention, saluting in front of him. "Guardsmen Arthur Nathamer, mylord. I come with an important request from Hackor Nathamer, commander of Raylansfair's city guard", he explained.

"Oh my god...", the woman mumbled and a wide smile appeared on her face. "Arthur?" He gave her a surprised nod and raised an eyebrow. "Do we know each other, mylady?", he asked. Harris let out a sigh and gave him a nod. "I assume the answer is yes. Arthur, this is Sherryl Flowers"

It took Arthur a moment to remember this name and the woman raised from the bed, walking towards him. "Don't say you have forgotten me. I used to play with your little sister when we were younger", she said. This finally caused Arthur to open his eyes widely. "Sherryl!", he exclaimed and gave her a short hug. "By the gods, it's been years!" By the gods, she was barely half as old as Harris! "Almost a decade", Sherryl answered. "I'm glad you still remember" "What are you doing here again?", Arthur asked and Harris cleared his throat, his cheeks slightly blushing. "Sherryl is here because I invited her. She has spent the past decade in Oldtown and gained important knowledge, knowledge I am interested in" He pointed at the door. "Please, Arthur, let us continue this conversation outside", he ordered and looked at Sherryl.

“Sherryl, why don't you get ready to tell me this important... this thing we have talked about earlier?” The woman gave him a bright smile and a seductive wink. “Of course, mylord”, she chuckled, noticing how the faces of Harris and Arthur got red in unison. Both men stepped outside and Harris closed the door behind them. He gave Arthur a stern glare. “Can I count on your discretion?”, he asked.

Arthur gave him a hasty nod. “Of course, mylord!”, he was quick to say. “I mean, I'm not even judging you. She is certainly...” “Beautiful”, Harris completed the sentence. “I hope you don't get a bad opinion on me now, Arthur. I haven't planned this, but it has been a long day and I am just a man, not even particularly godly. Who am I to refuse a woman like her?”

His gaze hardened again as he noticed the slightly disapproving look in Arthur's eyes. “What?”, he asked. Arthur let out a sigh. “I can understand you, mylord, I really can. But isn't she... you know, a bit too young?” Harris shook his head. “And I can understand your criticism, Arthur. But it's not like I asked her to come here just because of her beauty. She has important information for me, directly from the Citadel in Oldtown. The rest... it just happened”

Before Arthur could answer, Sherryl's voice was heard from the room behind them. “You know I can hear you?”, she said loudly and Harris closed his eyes for a moment. “Change of topic”, the lord ordered and Arthur gave him a quick nod. “Change of topic”, he confirmed.

“How can I help the city guard today, Arthur?”, Harris asked, clearly relieved that Arthur wasn't continuing their previous topic any longer. “You have heard about the murders happening in the city, Lord Harris?”, Arthur asked. It was a rhetorical question, obviously, but Harris still gave him a nod and narrowed his eyes. “Have you found those responsible?”, he asked.

“Not we”, Arthur revealed. “Richard Harking has” A pleased smile appeared on Harris' face.

“Harking! I knew he would be of great use for this city”, he exclaimed and gave Arthur a knowing smile. “Let me guess, Commander Hackor needs more men to attack them”

Arthur shook his head. “Not necessarily. My father has a dozen men with him and is ready to attack. However, he could need your support. The people he has with him are members of the city guard, young boys who joined us for a hot meal and a copper coin a day. What we need are soldiers”, he answered.

“Soldiers, I see”, Harris mumbled and seemed to think about this for a moment. “I will give you half a dozen of my own men, lead by Raylansfairs new master-at-arms, Ser Darren Tallwood”

Arthur looked up in pleasant surprise. “Half a dozen?”, he asked. “This is wonderful, mylord! And a real knight to lead them... Father will be pleased” He took a respectful bow in front of Harris. “Thank you, mylord. Your support makes a difference”

“Your welcome, Arthur. Will you fight alongside your father?”, Harris asked and Arthur realized that he hadn't even decided about this yet. His father hadn't given him any order in this direction or against it. Fighting... he knew he wasn't a particularly good fighter. He hated the possibility of

killing his opponent. And he knew his father would disapprove to see him among the fighters. Then again, his father disapproved of many things. Perhaps this was the chance to win his respect. Or perhaps he would get himself killed. It had been a long day and his sister was alone at home. Perhaps it would be better to skip this fight and hope for another opportunity to win his father's respect.

[Accompany the troops and fight alongside them]

Raenna

"Gods, please, I don't want to die...", the man pleaded, desperate tears flowing down his face. Blood was flowing out of his destroyed knee and his trousers were stained with a different kind of liquid already, much to Raenna's disgust. Mercy... mercy wasn't a bad thing in situations where she could afford it. Sadly, this wasn't such a situation. This man was dangerous, even with a destroyed knee. She knew people like him. He would pursue his revenge. He would search the city for the silver-haired woman who killed his friends and crippled him. This wasn't vengeance. The short moment of anger she had felt as the men had insulted her, it was gone now. Raenna was as calm as she had been trained to be and she did what was necessary.

"Close your eyes", she ordered and the man shook his head. "No, no! Please, no, n...!", he exclaimed, with the last word being cut off by Raenna's dagger. The blade moved downwards, into his chest and penetrating his heart. His eyes widened as he made his last breath. It was a quick death, a painless death. Raenna knew at least one person who would have preferred to make him suffer. "You can open your eyes again", she said softly.

Shivering, perhaps out of fear, the innkeeper opened his eyes, his skin as pale as snow as he looked around the inn. "You... you killed them. And this man... he begged for mercy", he stuttered. Raenna gave him a nod. "I did", she answered and pressed her lips together. "I don't feel sorry for them. They provoked the fight"

The innkeeper let out a sigh. "The Seven know these men deserved their fate. I know exactly what they would have been capable of if you wouldn't have defended yourself. This wasn't the first time they tried something like this, although it was the first time I saw them failing", he answered and his eyes moved down towards the newly dead man.

His face darkened as he gulped and looked at the dagger in Raenna's hand. "This was quite a show you made. Where have you learned to fight like this?", he asked. Raenna looked down onto the dagger. It wasn't hers, at least not really. It was the reason she was still alive. At Blackwater, a man had tried to strangle her to death until Kersea had thrown one of her daggers into his neck. So far, Raenna had no chance to give it back to her...

"A good friend taught me", Raenna answered and had to think about the old man. The innkeeper gave her a nod and she finally noticed that he wasn't scared of her, but still anxious

and nervous about something else. "What is the matter, good man?", she asked, narrowing her eyes. The innkeeper let out a sigh. "As much as these men deserved their fate, as much as you just defended yourself...", he said and she finally noticed that the look in his eyes was helplessly desperate. "By killing these men, you killed me as well"

Raenna gave him a surprised look and opened her mouth slightly. "What... I don't understand...", she stuttered, even though she already had an idea what he meant. A wave of heartfelt sympathy flashed through her as she realized what she had done to this man.

"These were Butterfly's men and you killed them in my tavern. Regardless of whether or not Karl will go back to him, he will hear about what happened here", the innkeeper said and a sad, completely joyless smirk appeared on his face. "I'm not blaming you!", he was quick to add as he noticed the shocked look on Raenna's face.

Raenna put her hands down on the counter, leaning against it. It wasn't the first time something like this happened. Actually, it always came to this in the past. The downsides of being a highly trained tool, able to kill people in seconds. Wherever she went, she left ruins behind and every time she used her skills, even if it was for something good, innocent people ended up paying the price for it.

"So he... he would kill you for something I did?", Raenna asked. The innkeeper gave her a sad nod. "He kills for much less", he answered and Raenna looked down. A small pool of blood was seen at the spot where she had nailed Karl's hand to the counter. "Would it be different if I would have spared this asshole?", she asked. The innkeeper closed his eyes. "I don't know. Probably not. Butterfly only needs an excuse to kill someone", he answered and slammed his hands down onto the counter in visibly restrained anger. "Damn it..."

"Can you... can you leave the city?", Raenna asked and the innkeeper shook his head. "I have put all of my money into this tavern", he answered. "I have nothing left to leave this city, I can't even rent a horse" Raenna felt stinging guilt inside of her at the misery she had forced upon this man. Of course, she barely knew him. Clayton would ignore him, Alysanne would laugh about his problems. And exactly that was the difference between them. She removed the small purse from her belt, putting it onto the counter. "It's not much", she said. "But perhaps it will bring you to Highgarden or..."

The innkeeper looked at the purse, before shaking his head. "Highgarden won't be enough", he said with sadness. "If Butterfly really wants to get me, I would have to leave the kingdom to be safe of him" Before Raenna could answer, the man narrowed his eyes, looking past her as soft footsteps notified her of a new guest in the tavern.

"Perhaps I could help", a familiar voice sounded and Raenna nearly jumped around in surprise. Seven have mercy, how was this possible? He was in Braavos, he had been in Braavos for the past five years! It was impossible, but still, there he stood. He was a bit older than she

remembered him, his hair completely grey now, his hairline starting to recede. He had grown his remaining hair a bit longer, tying it into a short ponytail. Clad in elegant green clothes, she could mistake him for a Braavosi merchant. Fine wrinkles were visible on his kind face and the smile he flashed at her gave her a good glance of his rotten, brown teeth. "Hello, little Raenna", the Old Man greeted her.

He moved towards the innkeeper putting his purse onto the counter. It was considerably heavier than Raenna's and the innkeeper's eyes widened. "... who... who are you?", he stuttered. The Old Man slightly smirked at him and gave Raenna a friendly wink. "I'd prefer not to answer such a question", he said. "This should be enough to get you out of the kingdom, perhaps even across the Narrow Sea. In turn I want you to forget that you've seen me here"

The innkeeper slowly closed his mouth, looking at the full purse. Raenna saw a golden shimmer inside of it and gave the Old Man a surprised look. "... this... by the gods this will be almost enough to start a new life", the innkeeper said and the Old Man gave him a nod. "Far away from Butterfly", he said and looked at Raenna. "We have to talk, Raenna. Alone"

For a moment, Raenna expected that he would take her hand, just as he did in her childhood, but instead he simply bowed in front of the innkeeper respectfully. "I'd advice you to leave the city soon. Butterfly will hear about this and he will try to find those responsible", he said sternly, turned around and slowly started to walk out of the inn. The innkeeper looked from him to Raenna, who gave him an apologetic look. "I am sorry for what happened here", she said. "Will you be alright?"

"I don't know", the innkeeper answered and lifted the purse. "With this, I have a chance" A sad smile appeared on his face. "I'll leave the city soon. I just... I need a moment" Raenna lowered her head in understanding and turned around without another word, stepping above the corpse of one of her slain foes as she walked after the Old Man. She did not regret that she defended herself, but still she felt pity for this innocent man who got caught in the crossfire.

The Old Man waited for her in the doorway and she stopped in front of him, waiting for him to pass through it or to make room for her. He gave her a short, stern look and her hand moved towards her head. "Of course...", she mumbled, pulling her hood upwards so that it covered her hair. A smile appeared in the Old Man's face as he finally walked outside, with Raenna following him closely.

"So...", Raenna said as they stood on the street, not knowing what to say. "You... you certainly look old" The Old Man chuckled at this remark and gave her a nod. "And I'm finally feeling old too. You on the other hand have grown into a beautiful woman, sweet Raenna", he answered. Before he could continue, Raenna gave him a sudden hug, a joyful smile on her face. "I have missed you, Old Man", she whispered.

The Old Man put his hands onto her shoulder, gently putting some distance between them before looking her in the eyes. "Terroma", he said and she raised an eyebrow. "My birthname. I have started to use it again ever since I left our group"

"Terroma", Raenna said slowly. It sounded unfamiliar, even strange, to call him like that. He had been the Old Man to her ever since he found her, after she ran away from the brothel she spent her early childhood in. In all these years, the thought of calling him by a different name never occurred to her. "I have missed you... Terroma", she said again and this time a smile appeared on his face, clearly showing his brown teeth. "I have missed you too, Raenna", he said.

This time, she narrowed her eyes. "This is not a coincidence, right?", she asked. "Our meeting here, I mean" Terroma shook his head. "Not a complete coincidence, although I can't say I have planned to meet you here. You attracted my attention a few hours ago, when I spotted you walking through the streets of Oldtown, aimlessly and looking lost. I followed you in silence, up to this tavern", he explained. "And I have heard the commotion your arrival here caused. Tell me, why have you spared the man with the wounded hand?"

Raenna slightly shrugged as she was trying to find the right words to express her thoughts.

"This man... I saw something inside of him that could get better. Perhaps I just saw what I wanted to see. He had a newborn daughter", she explained and Terroma gave her a nod. "I understand", he answered. "I hope your mercy won't backfire"

"I hope so too...", Raenna mumbled, before narrowing her eyes again. "Why are you here, in Oldtown?" Terroma looked at her, the kind, innocent look she had missed so much, before answering. "I could ask you the same thing, little Raenna", he answered. Raenna frowned at these words, slightly shaking her head. "That was not an answer", she stated and Terroma gave her a nod. "No, it wasn't", he agreed, before slightly sighing. "But I suppose I shouldn't keep secrets from you. I am here for Kersea's sake"

"Kersea!", Raenna exclaimed, stopping in her tracks. Terroma looked at her and let out a sigh.

"Your reaction tells me everything I need to know. I had hopes she would be with you", he mumbled. "But she is not my only goal" The kind smile vanished from his face and Raenna had to gulp. There he was. The most dangerous man she ever met. "I am here to help Kersea, but I am mainly here to stop Clayton"

"Do you want to kill him?", Raenna asked, trying to sound indifferent. In truth, she could feel her heart beating in her chest and barely managed to contain her nervousness. And Terroma gave her a short nod. "I should have done it years ago", he said and a sadness she had never seen with him appeared on his face. "But he deceived me. Made me believe that it had been a good decision to give him the leadership over our group"

"What changed your mind?", Raenna asked curiously. Terroma looked at her and sighed. "Ellyrio Terys", he answered and Raenna closed her eyes. She remembered that name. Well, Kersea

remembered it better, she had muttered it every night in her sleep, lying close to Raenna. A braavosi merchant Clayton killed shortly before they left for Westeros again, a man he killed for no real reason.

"How have you learned about him?", Raenna asked. "By accident. He was a merchant and I am a merchant too now, trading with selfmade metalware. A mutual acquaintance told me about his death and I decided to investigate. Clayton killed him to gain a new cover identity, right?", Terroma answered and Raenna gave him a nod. "Before you complain, I was against it", she stated. "He and Alysanne went through with it on their own and they forced Kersea to help them. In that moment, I decided to leave them", she explained.

"And Clayton just let you go?", Terroma asked, leading her through a small alleyway as they spoke. Raenna shook her head. "He would have killed me the moment I tried to leave him. Luckily, I managed to fake my death", she said. Terroma gave her a curious look and she started to explain. "After Ellyrio Terys, Clayton decided to move back to Westeros, to the Reach and Oldtown. He wanted to continue to work for the man who recruited Kersea for our group" She noticed a frown appearing on Terroma's face and put a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Kersea was alive the last time I saw her, unwounded. Which did not apply to most of the rest", she tried to comfort him. "We took one last job before we were supposed to return to Oldtown. A notorious pirate captain was currently residing on a small island in Blackwater Bay and we were supposed to kill him. We infiltrated his camp, only to find out that we have been betrayed. One of our informers had sold us out to the pirate"

"And so you retreated?", Terroma asked and a shocked expression appeared on his face as Raenna shook her head. "Clayton refused to retreat. He pushed forwards, deeper into the camp. Nearly killed all of us. Alysanne killed the pirate captain, but I think she got wounded during this. Clayton pulled her out of the camp. Kersea fought at my side, but we were separated. A man attacked me, forcing me towards the edge of a small rock, disarming me, putting his hands around my throat, until Kersea threw a dagger into his neck. The dying man fell down the rock, pulling me with him"

Terroma raised both eyebrows in surprise as he looked at her. "You fell down a rock? How have you managed to survive?", he asked. A slight smirk appeared on Raenna's face. "It was a high fall, but I landed on top of the man. A few bruises and my ankle hurt for weeks, but luckily, I had a good teacher when it comes to land safely"

The old man chuckled as he heard this, although his chuckle stopped immediately. "And Kersea is alive for sure?", he asked. Raenna gave him a nod. "I went back to the camp. Killed the pirates who remained there. Counted the bodies of our men. Half a dozen dead, with the only ones I haven't found being Clayton, Kersea and Alysanne"

“And so you decided to leave them?”, Terroma asked and she gave him a nod. “Of course, I could have gone after them. Killing Clayton and Alysanne on my own, freeing Kersea, riding into the sunset with her”, Raenna answered and bit her lower lip. “But I haven't. Call me selfish, Old Man, but I never wanted to see Clayton or Alysanne again. Back in your days, we had honour. We killed the scum that no one else dared to kill. Slavers, serial killers, rapists... Clayton never cared to kill these men, instead he started to work for them, for the money. I just wanted to live for once”

Terroma put his hands onto her shoulders, gently kneading them. “I don't blame you, sweet Raenna”, he said. “But why have you decided to come to Oldtown, out of all the cities you could live in?” Raenna slightly shrugged as she was searching for an answer. Oldtown... Oldtown was just... “It's the largest city in Westeros. I thought I could find something good in here”, she answered.

“And instead you found only cruelty and lies”, Terroma answered softly. Raenna shook her head. “I found you”, she said with a smile, noticing the frown on Terroma's face. “You did”, he answered and continued to walk in silence.

“So, why exactly are you in Oldtown?”, Raenna asked and Terroma looked up. He let out a sigh and Raenna noticed just how old he actually was. “After I found out that Ellyrio Terys has been killed by Clayton, I did some research about the man. It turned out that he had a daughter, a young girl who miraculously survived Clayton's attack”, he answered

Raenna shook her head. “Not miraculously. Clayton spared her”, she explained. “I know”, Terroma quickly answered. “I just didn't knew it back then. Her mother had been dead for years, so greedy, distant relatives took Terys' mansion and sent the girl to live in an orphanage. I visited her there once. I did not talk to her, but I could clearly see how unhappy she was. So I arranged for her to escape. I paid the staff to stage her flight, gently guiding her through the streets of Braavos, towards a certain ship and a certain cabin, where I have already been waiting for her. I have hoped that her presence would lure Clayton out of hiding”

“So, you manipulated her, used her as a bait”, Raenna stated tonelessly and noticed the hurt expression on Terroma's face. “It's not like this...”, he answered and his hands moved down to Raenna's clenched fists. “Raenna, I did this for her sake as well. To find her father's killer. And what was planned as a trick ended up to be genuine. I care for this girl, Raenna, I care for her like a father”

“Old Man, sometimes I don't know if I should hug you for being so sweet, or punch you in the face for being a manipulative asshole”, Raenna hissed, but she relaxed again. “You haven't answered my question though. Why Oldtown? I know you have a plan and Oldtown is a part of it”

Terroma looked mildly impressed by her persistence as he continued to speak. "I know, the man who holds Kersea's sister hostage lives here", he answered and Raenna realized what he was talking about. "You want to free her!", she exclaimed. "You want to free Briar Catelins"

Teromma gave her a short nod. "Little Briar does not deserve to be held hostage by such a man. And Kersea deserves her peace. The man who holds her hostage is the man they call 'Butterfly'", he explained. Raenna's eyes widened as she remembered whom the men from the inn have worked for. "Butterfly...", she mumbled. "Are you going to kill him?"

"Only if he is stupid enough to get in my way", Terroma answered and something about him changed. It was a subtle change. The way he stood, the way he walked, the way he pronounced certain words and especially the look in his eyes, all of this told Raenna without a doubt that the man in front of her was dangerous, perhaps more dangerous than the rest of this city combined. Terroma stopped, pointing at a small alleyway. "Here is my hideout. I have friends here in Oldtown, friends who will help me with my plan", he explained. "I have been idle for far too long, while Clayton destroys everything I fought for. Now I am back and I can't tell you how angry I am at what he did" Raenna noticed how she barely dared to breathe in the presence of his anger.

"What are you going to do?", she asked tonelessly.

Terroma's gaze hardened even more. "With the help of my friends, I will find out where Butterfly's hideout is located. I will storm it, I will free Briar and on my way I will kill any man who dares to stand against me", he growled. "Then, I will chase after Clayton and I will end this. I will show him why I am still his master"

His face softened considerably as he looked back at Raenna and she recognized his kind smile. "And for this, I could need your help, dear Raenna. I know you want to leave this chapter of your life behind, but you have always been my best student. And you are the best friend Kersea has in this world. Perhaps your presence and her sister will convince her to abandon Clayton", he explained and extended his hand towards her. "What do you say? Will you help me, one last time?"

[Help him]

Jaron

Jaron smirked at Ayden, before turning towards Martin's table. "We'll talk later, Ayden. First, I have a victory to enjoy", he said. "Fair enough", Ayden answered, turning towards the hallway. "Make sure to talk to me later. We might have won this fight, but as long as Butterfly's men are out there, the war is not over"

Both men walked into opposite directions, with Jaron approaching Martin and Bakr. The Ghiscari was clearly not sober anymore and Martin's reddened cheeks proved that he had drunken a few glasses as well. The whore sitting on Martin's lap was the first who saw Jaron

approaching. She gave Martin a slight nudge and the mercenary looked up, raising his glass with a big grin. "Jaron!", he yelled. "Get your ass over here!" He pointed at an empty chair in front of him.

Finally, Bakr realized that Jaron was approaching. A big, goofy grin appeared on his face, he attempted to say something, but instead only a loud burp found its way out of his mouth, followed by his roaring laughter.

Jaron sat down in front of Martin, giving him and the whore a slight nod. The woman gave him a slight wink in return. "Jaron, may I introduce you to Keira, the most beautiful whore in Oldtown", Martin said with a grin. The whore raised an eyebrow and playfully frowned at this remark. "It's not as if I have that much of a competition", she chuckled and looked at Jaron. "Martin surely has a way with words, hasn't he?"

"Indeed he has", Jaron answered, looking around if he could find himself a glass of wine. Martin noticed his struggle and raised a hand, which caused a little girl to approach their table. "Come on, girl, bring my friend a stiff drink", Martin ordered her. "He's a hero, you know"

Jaron noticed that he had to grin at this remark and slightly shook his head. "That stretches it a little bit", he said. Martin gave him a stern look and took a deep gulp from his wine. "A damn hero", he repeated and put his glass down. "Keira, I need to, um... you know, the privy"

The whore put a hand on his shoulder and stood up from his lap, allowing him to stand up. Her green eyes looked at Jaron. "You left quite the impression on Martin here", she explained while sitting down onto the mercenaries chair, looking at Martin, who quickly left the room. "The whole evening he had to repeat your story over and over, how you defied that monster Butterfly against all odds. Of course, he also never failed to mention his own involvement"

"And my involvement!", Bakr shouted, barely intelligible. "Everyone always forgets about what I did. Split that assholes head right open!" Jaron and Keira looked at him for a short moment, before simultaneously deciding to ignore him. "So, how do you know Martin?", Jaron asked and was half sure that he would regret it.

Keira seemed to notice his hesitation and slightly rolled with her eyes. "Not in the way you think. He's not a regular customer. In fact, he does not pay", she explained, before raising her hands. "It's nothing serious either, just a casual fling. Martin is kind and better than most. In a city like Oldtown, this means a lot"

"Do you know what also means a lot?", Bakr asked, raising his glass. "Having enough to drink! Back in the old days, during one of my raids to the Dothraki Sea, I was forced to drink a Dothraki beverage, made from horse piss. Actual horse piss!"

He started to chuckle, leaning back on his chair and apparently didn't even expect an answer. Keira glanced at him, before looking back at Jaron. "Where was I?", she asked, a smirk on her face as she glanced at Bakr again.

Jaron turned his head to his left as he saw the young girl from earlier approaching. Without saying a word, but with a smile on her face, she handed him a large cup, filled to the brink with a clear liquid. Jaron gave her a friendly nod, before smelling at the liquid. A disgusted frown appeared on his face. "Seven Hell, what is this?"

Keira moved forwards, slightly sniffing at his drink. A playful smile appeared on her face. "That's what Martin would call a 'stiff drink'", she said. "I'm not blaming him. He grew up in Braavos, where they even consider water a 'stiff drink'"

Jaron took a careful sip and felt how the alcohol started to murder his taste buds. Violently coughing, he put the cup back onto the table, which caused Keira to laugh brightly. "Do not worry, Martin reacted the same", she said.

"Not true!", Martin's voice sounded as he entered the room again, quickly walking back to their table. He put his hands onto the table, slightly leaning on it as he looked at Jaron. "I reacted far worse. Drank a cup of this and nearly died from it" He looked down at Jaron's left arm, hanging inside of a sling. "So... Harpy told me you blocked a sword with your arm, is that right?"

Jaron gave him a nod, as he remembered this moment. Slight pain flashed through his arm, causing him to shiver. "It was either my arm or my head", he answered. "And I am lucky that I still have both" "Indeed you are", Martin answered. "What Harpy told me made you appear downright suicidal, taking on several of Butterfly's men at once, blocking sword strikes with your arm and stuff"

Jaron raised his unwounded hand in protest. "To my defence, I had good armour", he explained and Martin gave him a grin. "And obviously more luck than judgement", he answered. "But I'm glad you survived" His grin vanished as he lowered his eyes, a melancholic look in them.

"Although not all of us had that much luck. Tell me... how did Robb die?"

Jaron's smirk faded as well. Robb... considering how bad they got along, the man's final actions still baffled him. "Hasn't Harpy told you about it?", he asked, trying to avoid the topic. He had to admit that he was wrong with his earlier opinion on the man. In the end, Robb had saved his life and Harpy's as well.

Martin slowly shook his head. "She tried her best to avoid talking to me. The little things I got out of her mainly gave me a picture of what you did. She stayed silent when it came to Robb", he answered and let out a sigh. "She also refused to talk about Butterfly, quite understandably. But I know what happened to that bastard, now I just want to know what happened to Robb"

"He saved us. Me and Harpy", Jaron answered with a low tone in his voice, taking another gulp from his glass. This time, the alcohol felt a lot less strong. "They got her down on the ground. I had to fight against Butterfly and one of his men, I couldn't help her. Robb killed one of my attackers and engaged Butterfly in single combat" He closed his eyes for a moment, the joy he had felt earlier was all but gone. "He died valiantly and with honour"

Martin pressed his lips together and let out a sigh, which caused Keira to put her hands around his shoulders. "Now that's a surprise", he muttered. "I was willing to kill him not even a day ago and now... I don't know how to feel about him anymore. He was an asshole, that's undeniable. But he was a loyal asshole and damn fine man in his own way"

With these words, Martin raised his glass. Jaron did the same and to his surprise, even Bakr stopped grinning and grabbed his glass, looking stern and serious. "To Robb", Martin proclaimed. "And to all the others who died in this war. May their souls find peace, now that their killer is dead"

"I can drink to that", Bakr mumbled and emptied his cup in a single gulp. Martin and Jaron both took a sip from their alcohol, before putting it down again. Martin gave Keira a slight smile and she smirked at him, before the mercenary looked back at Jaron. "I got to ask you one more thing before I forget it, my friend. What exactly is the situation between you and Harpy now?" Jaron avoided to look into Martin's eyes as he looked for a good answer. He had never been good talking about his feelings and the situation was uncomfortable for him. "I don't know", he answered truthfully. "We haven't talked, after the warehouse I mean. I have the feeling she tried to stay away from me"

Martin let out a frustrated sigh, slightly rolling with his eyes. "That's fair, my friend. One more question though", he said and raised his voice. "Are you the dumbest bastard alive? Sitting here, talking to me and Keira..." "And Bakr!", Bakr interrupted him loudly. "And Bakr...", Martin corrected himself. "Talking to me and Keira *and Bakr*, while that girl is out there waiting for you?" "Waiting for me?", Jaron asked in surprise and Martin gave him an annoyed nod. "Well, technically she is apparently trying to drink herself to death...", he said, before he was interrupted by Bakr again. "I tried that once. Took me a whole day of drinking and in the end I simply passed out in my own vomit. Then again, that girl has only a quarter of my weight...", he proclaimed, before a glare from Martin cut him off. "Okay, okay, I'm silent", the Ghiscari mumbled.

"What I wanted to say is, technically she is not waiting for you, but I'm sure she would appreciate your company", Martin explained. "I don't know", Jaron answered, looking for a way to change the course of this conversation. "What if she, you know, does not share my feelings?" "What if she...?", Martin gasped. "Are you serious right now? You saved that girl's life back in the warehouse, risking your own in the process. Do your pal Martin a favour, get up, go outside to the balcony and get that girl. Now's the time!" The mercenary and Keira exchanged a short glance, before they were interrupted again by Bakr.

"You know, that's actually not a good tactic", he interjected. "Back in my days, I knew exactly how to handle a woman and even now, you should listen to my advice over that boy-faced sellsword over there" He leant forwards, ignoring the glare coming from Martin. "Let her wait for

a little bit. I have counted. She's still at her first bottle, which is good, but it could be better. So here's what you're going to do; Step one, do something else for a while. Step two, come back later. Step three, go outside to find her pissed drunken and ready for everything. Step four, you win”

Jaron looked from Martin to Bakr. Both men seemed to be convinced that their advice was better and both men looked at Jaron, awaiting a decision. He knew, he couldn't avoid talking to Harpy forever. And didn't even want to avoid it. But then he remembered Ayden Blackwell, who had urged him to meet up with him, to make a plan about their next move in this war.

[Make plans with Ayden first]

Lyria

Through a small gap between the shutters, Lyria kept an eye on the street. The door was locked and with Rosalie's help, she had moved the large wooden table out of her dining room in front of it. The backdoor was locked twice. The shutters in front of every window in her house were closed. It was dark outside, but the main room of her house was brightly illuminated. Lyria was holding her forging hammer, Rosalie had a long knife lying next to her. By all means, a single man should be unable to break into her house. But still, Lyria Mettel felt threatened.

She had left Richard and his friends on their own. Helping the city guard, giving them valuable information, that was her duty as a citizen. Fighting alongside them against highly trained killers, that was suicide. It was presumptuous to assume that she, a simple blacksmith, could make any difference in this fight. And so she had returned home, locked the door and shut the windows, waiting until Richard and the others would return with good news. Wolfius was out in the city, perhaps looking for her, perhaps looking for Rosalie or for someone else entirely. Until he was gone, she would stay vigilant. She had already lost her husband to a killer, she wouldn't lose her daughter too!

“Mother...”, Rosalie said with shaking voice, just as Lyria thought she spotted a figure, standing in the shadows of the alleyway that opposed her house. “What is it?”, Lyria growled, her eyes not moving away from the suspicious shadow. Yes, that was almost certainly a figure... had Wolfius followed her all the way here? What was he doing now? He wouldn't be able to get inside!

“Mother, there's a rat”, Rosalie said again, this time her voice was slightly shaking. Lyria let out a sigh and turned around, seeing her daughter with a mortified facial expression, looking at a small rat that was calmly walking through the room. The animal didn't even bother to look at Lyria, which caused her to give Rosalie a short glare. “Rosie, was that really necessary?”, she asked.

Rosalie looked at her mother and Lyria saw terror inside of them. "You... you have looked too late. Before you turned around, it was just... it was standing still and looking at me", she stuttered. "I think it was watching me..." She was breathing faster now and Lyria finally moved away from the window, watching the rat disappearing into the forge room. She embraced her daughter and felt her shaking in fear.

"Shh, everything is fine, Rosie. If you are afraid, your mind sometimes plays tricks on you", she said and felt Rosalie shivering. Her daughter looked up and her eyes widened as she let out a short scream while jumping up from her chair. "Behind you!", she yelled. Lyria quickly turned around, her hammer raised... only to see the rat Rosalie had been panicked over sitting on the windowsill, innocently licking its paws.

Lyria sighed and held her daughter closely, slightly shaking her head. "Rosie, this is just a rat", she said and separated from her. She took a step towards the animal, which looked at her with mild interest. "See? There is nothing to fear", Lyria said and looked at Rosalie, while she slowly moved her left hand towards the rat. For a moment, her daughter indeed seemed to calm down. Suddenly, a terrified expression flashed over Rosalie's face. "Watch out!", she screamed. In the same moment, pain flashed through Lyria's index finger.

The rat had made a jump towards her, sinking its teeth into the flesh of her finger. Lyria let out a scream of pain as she let go of her hammer, grabbing the rat with her free hand and smashing it onto the windowsill. In the wave of anger her pain caused, she only needed one strike to end the animal's life.

Breathing heavily, Lyria looked at her wounded finger. The bite wasn't deep, but still painful. A piece of flesh was missing and for such a small wound, it was bleeding heavily. "My god, what was that?", Lyria asked, looking at her terrified daughter. "Rosie, bring me some water. I need to clean this"

Without saying a word, Rosalie gave her a nod, her face pale with fear as she scurried towards the storeroom. Lyria looked at her bleeding finger, before she leant down to the ground, to pick up her hammer again. Her gaze fell upon the dead rat. It wasn't the first rat Lyria had killed in her life, but the first that had attacked her. Usually, they were shy creatures, nothing to be afraid of. And then she heard it. Faint laughter, coming from across the street, a malicious chuckle full of perverted joy.

"That was entertaining to watch, blacksmith Mettel", the familiar voice of Wolfius called her out. Lyria darted towards the window, looking through the gap, only to see nothing. The suspicious shadow was gone.

"Have you thought you could hide from me?", Wolfius' voice sounded from a different window. Rosalie's surprised scream gave away that he was standing at the small window of the storage

room. She had closed it, luckily, but his voice could still be heard. Mortified, Rosalie ran into the main room, clinging to her knife. "Mother, he's here!", she screamed.

"Don't you worry, you dumb little whore, your mother knows already", Wolfius shouted from a different window. The small forge room window. "Go away!", Lyria yelled and was shocked at how meek her voice sounded. Wolfius amused chuckle was predictable. "What do you want? I did everything you want!", Lyria yelled again.

"Oh, but that's wrong...", Wolfius voice sounded again, this time from behind the window she was standing at. "You informed the city guard, even though I asked you not to do it... and that, my dear blacksmith Mettel, that is something I can't tolerate" The last words of his sentence were spoken with barely concealed anger and Lyria shivered in terror. Seven Hells, she should have stayed with Richard and the others!

She moved towards the gap between the shutters, looking through it if she could get a glimpse of Wolfius. The first thing she saw was something moving quickly towards her eye and she jumped back, just in time to avoid getting stabbed by his knife. The tip of his blade, sticking through the gap, nearly managed to stab her eye before she was out of reach.

"Good one!", Wolfius complimented her mockingly, pulling his knife back through the gap and into the nightly darkness. "Truly excellent! Sadly, your reflexes won't help you... Do you really think these walls can keep me out forever?" The hint of his face appeared in the gap, his eye looking at Rosalie. "Hello, Rosalie. You're looking especially lovely today", he said and Lyria saw her daughter close to a panic attack.

"I can see you, Rosalie", Wolfius hissed. "I can hear your heart beating in fear. I can smell your terror and I can't wait to taste your blood. You're going to die tonight, you and your mother" Lyria pressed her lips together, swinging her hammer towards the shutters. "Get away!", she screamed and Wolfius took a step back.

"Away? And where shall I go?", he asked, his voice signaling that he was moving around the house. "Perhaps here?", he asked and pounded against the shutters of the window next to the main door. "Or perhaps here?" The doorknob turned, only for a frustrated sigh to sound as Wolfius realized that he wouldn't be able to open the door. "No? Do you think that table behind the door can keep me out forever? I'll find another way inside..."

Lyria took a step closer to Rosalie, embracing her softly. The girl was crying in fear and shivering like never before. Lyria remembered, Rosalie had always been a strong girl. She barely cried back as her father had been killed by the Ironborn. Seeing her like this, it filled Lyria with helpless rage.

"Or perhaps...", Wolfius said after a short moment of silence, only to be interrupted by a loud noise, loud and sudden enough to make Rosalie and Lyria scream in surprising fear. And in Lyria's case, the fear was only amplified as she recognized the noise. It was the backdoor,

leading from her forge to the outside, the backdoor she had locked! Her hands moved down to her belt, she always carried the key... by the gods, it wasn't there anymore! Desperate tears filled Lyria's eyes as she realized that the keys that locked her inside of this house, the keys that kept Wolfius on the outside have been gone, as she realized that he somehow managed to unlock the backdoor.

"What was that?", Wolfius voice sounded, surprisingly from behind the maindoor. How had he... Lyria gulped. How had he unlocked the backdoor while standing at the main door? He couldn't have ran back to the main door that quickly, could he? "It sounded as if your impenetrable fortress just opened its gates for me...", the beast growled.

Lyria looked down at the hammer in her hand and felt the rage inside of her. She was stronger than him, she knew it. He was convinced that he had succeeded in reducing her to a sobbing mess, filled with fear. If she would storm outside now, perhaps she could catch him off guard. Perhaps she could kill him, or at least chase him away. Or perhaps she could at least lure him away from Rosalie. She nearly gave in to the urge, as Rosalie's hand grabbed hers. "Mother, don't...", the girl whispered with tears in her eyes.

[Go outside and confront Wolfius]

Alys

Alys pressed her lips together and took a deep breath, trying not to show her fear in front of this man. Without saying anything, Edward, Alisa and Carvin went down in their knees, while Harrick walked up to the throne and took position next to his father. Alys herself remained standing, at least for another moment. Harren Hoare leant forwards, putting his hands on his knees as he was glaring at the group. For a moment, he looked at Alys and to her horror, she slowly saw an angry expression appearing on his face.

"Alys...", Edward hissed and grabbed her hand, pulling her down onto the ground. The angry expression on the king's face vanished, instead replaced by a pleased smirk. "And who do we have here?", he asked with a deep, husky voice.

"Father, this is Edward Anturion, a pirate captain from the Stepstone Islands", Harrick started to introduce the group. "His companions, the mercenaries Carvin Granver and Alisa of House Karstark. And the young woman at his side is Lady Alys of House Boleyn" Harren heard these names with indifference on his face, but raised an eyebrow as he heard the last two names.

"It is surprising to me that you have a kinslayer at your service, Anturion", he growled and Alys saw that Alisa gasped in surprise. Edward and the king glared at each other for a moment, until Edward looked away first. "Lady Alisa's past is of no concern to me. She is loyal to me and that is all that matters to me", he answered.

Harren slightly chuckled at this answer and shook his head. "I am sure her brother thought the same", he snarled and his glare moved on to Alisa. "Isn't that right, Lady Alisa?" A cruel smirk appeared on his face as he noticed the distraught expression on Alisa's face. "Your grace, it was...", she started, but was silenced as Harren raised his hand. "I can't remember that I allowed you to talk", the king growled and looked at his son. "Harrick, the next time this kinslaying rat speaks in my presence, kill her"

Harrick raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth, only to close it immediately afterwards without saying a word. He gave his father a nod and gave Alisa an apologizing glance. The king's black glare moved on to Alys, who tried her best to withstand the urge of looking away. Without even wanting it, she started to shiver and she had no doubt that Harren noticed it. "Lady Alys of House Boleyn...", he said slowly. "According to my information, you should be safe at home, awaiting your marriage to Dante Karstark", he revealed to Alys' surprise.

For a short moment, his glare moved back to Alisa. "It's a wonder you haven't killed your cousin too, my dear", he chuckled and almost burst into laughter as he noticed the pained expression on Alisa's face. "Back to you, Lady Alys. What are you doing here, in the presence of a pirate, a kinslayer and...?" He shortly looked at Carvin. "And whatever terrible secret that one tries to hide"

Alys gulped, still withstanding his glare. Never before had she seen eyes that dark. The iris almost looked like a bottomless hole, full of anger, full of hatred. "I... I ran away from home. I didn't want to marry Dante...", she said and realized something. "Your grace, how do you know that I was nearly engaged to him?"

The anger in Harren's eyes slightly faded and an amused streak appeared on his face. "For the past forty years I have been the undisputed King of the Isles and the Rivers. Do you think I could have stayed in power for so long if I wouldn't know about every move my enemies make, as tiny as it might be?", he asked. "But you haven't answered my question. According to my sources, Lady Alisa ran away from home twelve years ago, when she wasn't older than you are today. How have you met up with her again?"

And all of a sudden, the feigned amusement faded again, effortlessly replaced by the look of sheer cruelty in his eyes. Alys found it harder than ever to look into them. "I... I ran away from home. Travelled south, alone. A few hours ago, I was... I was hunted", she revealed and stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath. "By your son"

Harren slowly raised an eyebrow. "My son?", he asked. "Which one?" Alys and Edward exchanged a glance and she realized that her mouth was slightly open. "Which one?", she asked. Harren gave her a slight nod. "Aye, that's what I said. I have more than one son, so you have to be more specific"

Alys shivered as she heard the indifference in his voice. She realized, it did not matter to him what she had to say. "Harlan", she answered. Harren let out a sigh. "Of course, it had to be him. You're still alive, after all. Harmund would have killed you by now. But Harlan once again disappointed me", he snarled and for a short moment, Harrick shot him a cold glare.

"Disappointed?", Alys asked and couldn't stop the irritated tone in her voice. "He disappointed you by not killing me?" Harren raised an eyebrow and a cruel smirk appeared on his face. "By failing at everything he tries, once again. I have no problem with you and if you want to keep it that way, choose your next words carefully", the king hissed.

"So you won't do anything to punish him? To prevent him from doing it again?", Alys asked and Edward, Alisa, Carvin and Harrick looked at her in complete shock. Harren Hoare on the other hand leant forwards, a spark of interest in his eyes. He started to chuckle, a deep, terrible sound that reminded Alys of a bear. "Girl, you got balls of iron", he complimented her and slowly raised from his thrones.

Alys just stood there, frozen in terror as the king approached her. She did not move as Harren grabbed her chin with two fingers, uncomfortably hard. She successfully suppressed a scared sound as he moved closer. "You either watch your tongue, or I'll have it cut from your head. I have killed men for a lot less", he growled. "And if you're going to tell me again how I have to handle my own sons, if you dare to tell ME how I have rule MY KINGDOM..." He paused for a moment and in his eyes, Alys saw exactly what he would do to her. She forced herself to give him a nod. "I understand, your grace. I meant no disrespect", she stuttered.

Harren released her from his grip and slowly walked back to his throne. "No, you obviously didn't. You just like to talk faster than you can actually think, isn't that right?", he growled. "Be assured that I will deal with Harlan. But I won't tolerate a little girl who tries to teach me how to rule. This was your only warning"

The sound of the door being opened caused Harren to look up and Alys to turn around. A young man, perhaps in her age, entered the room. He had short black hair and green eyes that were quite handsome, although his face was long and gaunt, with a weak chin and weasely features. In his hands, the young man held a bronze carafe and he slowly approached the king, who narrowed his eyes.

"A... a refreshment, your... your grace", the boy stuttered and slowly approached the king. Harren grabbed the carafe with obvious annoyance and took a deep gulp from it, while the boy took a step backwards.

Harren rolled with his eyes, the liquid still in his mouth, before he spat it all on the ground, slightly coughing. "WHAT IS THIS?", he yelled at the top of his lungs. "WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME?" The boy cringed and took another step backwards, raising both of his hands. "Arbor Gold, your grace! It's wine!", he explained hastily.

The king gave him a nod. "I know what the fuck Arbor Gold is!", he snarled. "The question is, why do you bring it to me?" He raised the carafe and threw it across the room, unerringly hitting the boy's chest and causing him to stumble backwards, while spilling the wine across the floor. "Your grace, I... I just thought...", the boy tried to say, but Harren cut him off. "Yes, you think, that is your problem! Now, get out of my sight before I send your head back to the Twins!"

The boy immediately ran out of the room, while Harren had visible problems in calming down again. "Adrew Frey...", he mumbled. "My squire. Another one of Harrick's brilliant ideas. Keep the Lord of the Crossing close to prevent a rebellion" "He hasn't rebelled so far, father, even after what Harmund did", Harrick reminded him and the king gave him a nod. "Aye, he hasn't. Well done, son", he growled and to Alys' surprise, the compliment sounded genuine.

The king leant forwards and looked at Edward. "So, Anturion... it's time that we discuss your proposition. You claim you know a way to give me the Rock?", he growled and Alys looked at Edward. The man looked up and straight into Harren's eyes. "Indeed, your grace", he said and a smirk appeared on his face. "Not only the Rock, to be precise. If my plan works, I can give you a lot more in the long run"

Harren narrowed his eyes and looked at Alys and the mercenaries. "I suppose this is something we best talk about in private", he snarled and to Alys' surprise, Edward gave him a nod. "For now, discretion might be for the best", he agreed. Harren leant back again, looking at his son. "Harrick, you bring the kinslaying Karstark whore, the other guy and Lady Alys to their quarters. They get the guest rooms in the tower. Make sure everything is to their convenience", he ordered.

For a moment, Harrick looked as if he was about to protest, but instead he saluted in front of the king. "Yes, father!", he exclaimed and started to walk towards Alys. To her surprise, he extended a hand and helped her back to her feet. "Mylady, please follow me", he said with a soft voice, leading Alys, Alisa and Carvin out of the room.

Alys looked over her shoulder, catching Edward looking at her. The man gave her a reassuring smile, before turning his attention back to Harren Hoare. "Now, your grace... have you ever heard about the town of Raylansfair?", he asked, before Harrick closed the door and prevented Alys from listening any more.

The king's son let out a sigh. "Whatever it is your employer wants to discuss with my father, I don't like it", he mumbled as he led the group through the hallway. "Me neither", Carvin revealed. "I worked for Anturion's brother, fought for him in the Free Cities. Always thought that he was the worst kind of bastard I ever met. But Edward... he's ambitious and that is something even worse"

"What is he trying to achieve anyway?", Alys asked curiously and Carvin glanced at her. "That's something he should explain himself. He pays me enough not to reveal his plans", the mercenary answered. "But it's big, very big"

Harrick let out a sigh and slightly shook his head. "Look around you, mercenary. You stand inside of the biggest plan my father ever made. Harrenhal bled this kingdom dry. You see, I don't exactly support big plans if they don't bring results", he growled. "Will Anturion's plan bring results?"

Carvin shrugged indifferently. "I don't care for that. Anturion pays me and that's all that matters", he muttered. For a moment, Alys saw something in Harrick's eyes that made him look more like his father. The hint of anger was visible in his dark eyes. "If he tries to manipulate my father, he will soon be just another corpse who thought it would be a good idea to cross him", he answered. "And I know that he is trying to manipulate him. I don't know how he is trying to do it, but it will fail" He looked from Carvin to Alisa, who walked a bit behind them, her head hanging low. "You better look out for a new employer soon", Harrick warned them, before his gaze softened a bit. "Lady Alisa!", he called softly.

Alisa looked up and narrowed her eyes. "What do you want?", she asked with an irritated tone, before she realized to whom she was talking. "I'm sorry, Prince Harrick", she added sheepishly. Harrick slightly grinned and shook his head. "Don't be. I apologize on my fathers behalf. He has not treated you like the lady you are", the prince apologized. Alisa shook her head. "I am no lady", she growled and made it clear that the talk was finished. Harrick let out a sigh, before turning away from her, focussing on leading the group through the huge castle.

Soon, Alys realized that they were going upwards, higher and higher. A look out of a window revealed that she was higher above the ground than she had ever been in her life. Harrenhal's walls alone were higher than the highest tower of Karhold.

Harrick stopped in front of a door and took out a key. "Here we are", he proclaimed as he slowly opened the door. "This part of the tower is restricted to the royal family, their servants and guests. I hope you realize what an honour it is that King Harren allows you to enter"

As much as Alys was excited to enter this part of the tower, soon she couldn't help but to feel slight disappointment. The royal part wasn't particularly luxurious. In fact, the furniture was surprisingly modest, reminding her of home. Dark tapestries and carpets covered the floor and the walls, a cozy fire provided warmth for the large room they entered. This was the first thing Alys noticed.

The second thing she noticed was the man who stepped out of a door at the other end of the room. He was taller, not as tall as Harrick, but he came close. Unlike him, this man was lean and scrawny, his dark tunic only loosely fitting. His hair was longer than Harrick's and he had a thick

beard. Finally, the twitching eyes gave him away as a Hoare. A sick hunger lay inside of them and a twisted smile appeared on his face.

"What have you brought here, brother?", he growled with a high voice. "Something new?" He slowly walked closer and Alys saw that he had a slightly hunched back. "Something to play with?" Harrick walked up towards him and raised his hand, preventing the man from coming any closer. "Oh, I see...", the man growled. "You want it all for yourself"

"Donnie...", Harrick growled. "Not now" He sighed as the man still tried to get closer and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Donnie, these are guests. You will treat them with respect", he said slowly and carefully. The other man slightly growled as he twitched free of Harrick's grip. "I am hungry, brother", he hissed.

Harrick let out a sigh and gently put a hand back on the other man's shoulder. "I'm going to bring you to the kitchen later, brother", he promised, but the other man shook his head. "I am hungry now. Bring me to the dungeons!", he ordered. Harrick looked up and caught Alys' shocked stare. Another sigh of deep frustration found its way out of the prince's throat. "I will show our guests their quarters and then I will bring you wherever you want to go, big brother", he promised again and this time, the other man seemed to be pleased by the answer. He took a step backwards, allowing Harrick and the others to continue their way. As Alys passed him, he shot her a hungry glare that made her shiver.

Harrick did not talk until they have passed through the room and entered the door the other man just walked out of. Behind it lay a long hallway, a dozen doors at each side. In silence, Harrick opened one of the doors and gave Carvin a nod. "Your room. There is a bell inside, if you need anything. The servants are already sleeping, but they are trained to hear well", he explained and opened the door next to it. "Lady Alisa, this would be your room" Alisa frowned at these words and slowly walked past him, closing the door behind her. Carvin chuckled and shook his head as he entered his room. "Looks pretty neat", he mumbled. "Good night, Lady Alys" With these words, he closed the door behind him, leaving Alys and Harrick Hoare alone in the hallway.

The prince lead her past a few doors, until he opened one at the end of the hallway. "This would be your room, mylady", he said and she took a look inside. For a moment, Alys stood in the doorway, her mouth widely open in surprise. The room behind this door was huge and it contained all the luxury the prior rooms missed, all the luxury she expected from a castle like this. It was a square room with a large window and a small balcony, wonderfully furnished, with red carpets, a large table, a cupboard and especially, a large four-postered bed with golden sheets.

"I see, the room is to your full satisfaction", Harrick chuckled and his words snapped Alys out of her trance. "Yes!", she was quick to say and a slight smile appeared on her face. "It is wonderful!

Gods, look at this bed!" She smiled as she slowly walked into the room, looking around. By the gods, this room alone was worth more than her fathers entire castle!

"I hope my brother hasn't scared you", Harrick muttered softly, as Alys turned around to face him. "His name is Harndon and he is my older brother by five years" A sad expression flashed over his face as Alys took a step closer. "What is... I'm sorry, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but what is his problem?", she asked.

"Harmund and Harlan are his problem", Harrick explained. "My older brothers. Despite his attitude towards his children, father never hit us. Me at least. In case of Harmund, he should have done it though, he should have beaten him to death. He also never really cared for us until we started to get useful. Harmund in turn, oh, he cared deeply for his little siblings, like a child cares for its toys"

He shuddered and looked down the hallway. "Harlan had it bad. On good days, Harmund beat him senseless. More than once, he nearly killed him. Once he broke Harlan's arm and father was more amused than outraged", he mumbled. Alys pressed her lips together as she remembered the evenings she spent sitting on her fathers lap, as he told her stories and gently held her until she fell asleep. "I am sorry", she mumbled.

"Don't be", Harrick answered. "Not for me, at least. Harlan on the other hand... he always wanted to be like Harmund, so he picked on Harndon, he picked on him twice as much. In time, Harmund got bored of just tormenting Harlan, so he started to do the same to Harndon. And Harndon... he was always a bit weaker in mind, but the abuse outright shattered him. He is unfit to rule, father officially proclaimed it. He has violent outbursts and spends most of his time locked in this part of the tower"

And exactly this was the part where Alys was supposed to sleep. Great. Fucking great... She pressed her lips together and slightly rolled with her eyes. She hated this family already, even if she couldn't help but to feel an ounce of pity for the deranged man she saw back in the room. As for Harlan... No, she couldn't feel pity for him, not after what he did, not after what he tried to do.

"But why are you...", she started to say, before she cut herself off. "Better?", Harrick completed the sentence. "Am I? Truth be told, I got lucky. When I was born, Harmund already fought a war and only spend little time here in Harrenhal. Harlan is not smart enough to torment two people at once. And Harndon... my little big brother is not cruel, at least not towards me", he said and his face formed a sad expression. "Excuse me, mylady. Here I am babbling like a fool, when my brother needs me. Please, lock your door before you go to bed" He took a deep bow in front of her. "Good night, Lady Alys"

With these words, he turned around and left Alys alone, before she had the chance to wish him a good night. For a short moment, she looked after him, before she closed her door, locking it

twice. She turned around and faced the bed, the wonderfully soft-looking bed. She let out a loud yawn as she thought about sleeping. "Good night", she whispered.

No choice for this part

Jenna

As Jenna looked up, seeing the Sept of Raylansfair against the nightly sky, she slowed down her steps. She had never particularly liked the Sept, surprising for someone who was used to pray a lot. Of course, Jenna was a religious person, it was just that she found no joy in visiting the Sept. It was a cold place, a place where people focussed on worshipping other people rather than worshipping the gods. For her own prayers, Jenna had a small shrine at home, with small wooden figurines depicting each of the Seven.

Despite her nervousness, the hint of a smile found its way onto her face as Jenna remembered how her mother had carved these figurines one evening, together with her oldest brother. Back then, it has been an easier life for her, with no Harris and no Wolfius. But now, her mother was dead, her brother was fighting a hopeless war in the dornish marches and she was working for a bad man to bring down someone who was even worse. For a moment, Jenna asked herself when exactly her life stopped being easy.

She closed her eyes. Not now. Now was a bad time to think about this. She had to focus on the task. Septon Corbin was in there. If Harris was right with his assumption, then Corbin sold her out to someone. Perhaps to the one behind Wolfius. At the very least, Corbin had told someone what she had told him, either deliberately or accidentally. If he did it accidentally, she could forgive him. Deliberately, on the other hand...

Shivering out of anxiety, Jenna Harking pushed open the left wing of the septs large door. During this time, it wasn't unusual for the Sept to be empty, save for Septon Corbin of course and today it wasn't any different. The interior of the building was dimly lit, only the lights around the seven altars allowed her to see. As always, the altars of the Father, the Mother and the Smith were illuminated brightly by dozens of candles and to Jenna's surprise, she saw that someone had lit a candle on the Stranger's altar as well.

"Septon Corbin?", she called as she slowly progressed into the Sept. Between the small benches for the praying and the simple, wooden statues depicting each aspect of the seven, there was no room for the portly septon to hide, so Jenna was surprised that she wasn't able to see him immediately. "Has someone called me?", the mans voice sounded from behind the Stranger's altar. Jenna shivered as she looked at the statue depicting the god. It was a thin and hooded silhouette, but underneath the hood, a long, inhuman skull full of teeth was visible.

"It's me, Jenna", she called him again. "Septon Corbin, I need to talk to you" She slowly approached the altar, her eyes fixed on the bestial statue. Behind the altar, she could see an

open trapdoor and a ladder, leading to the crypts below the building. "I'm on my way!", the Septon answered and she heard him slowly climbing up the ladder.

Finally, the pudgy Septon wormed his way through the trapdoor, breathing heavily as he did so. The hint of a smile was on his face as he turned around, although it quickly switched to an expression of sheer horror as his eyes fell upon the long wound on Jenna's face. "By the gods, Jenna...", he mumbled, his eyes widely opened.

She frowned at the look in his eyes and quickly turned away from him. She didn't want his pity. She didn't need his pity. She only needed an answer. "What happened?", Corbin asked softly as he approached her, opening his arms as if he wanted to hug her. The look in his eyes irritated her. It wasn't only the unwanted pity, it was something else, something worse. Surprise maybe. Was he surprised to see her still alive?

"Lady Halla is dead", she revealed and a distraught expression flashed over the Septon's face. "I was attacked by the same man who killed her" She pointed at the wound on her face and pressed her lips together as she felt anger rising inside of her. "He did this and he nearly killed my father as well"

Septon Corbin raised an eyebrow as he slowly approached her, raising a hand. A part of Jenna wanted to take a step back, out of his reach, but she knew, she couldn't show her suspicion towards him. Instead, she allowed him to put a hand on her shoulder, as he looked at her with warmth in his eyes.

"I don't know what to say. I am so sorry to hear this", he answered and in this moment, Jenna knew he was lying. She wasn't a good liar herself, she wasn't even good at spotting a lie. But if there was one thing she had encountered far too often in her life, it had been fake pity. She just felt that he was lying, that he wasn't sorry to hear this. At best, he was sorry that she survived. And then there were little details. The way he looked at her, the streak around his mouth that was obviously displeased to see her here.

"But, Jenna, why are you approaching me with this?", the Septon asked and his voice barely hid his anxiety. He suspected it, she could feel it. And she needed an excuse. Luckily, this wasn't hard, considering that she was talking to a Septon. "...", she started and stopped, biting her lower lip as she felt tears forming in her eyes. For once, she did not see it as a bad thing.

Septon Corbin's face got more approachable and friendly with every tear she shed. "I couldn't sleep. It hurts... and Lady Halla. I can't stop thinking about her. I know, you have been friends" Corbin gave her a sad nod and gently pushed her towards one of the benches, silently urging her to sit down. He sat next to her and grabbed her hand, as he softly smiled at her. "I have known Halla Peddle for thirty years now", he said, even though his sadness barely convinced Jenna. "Hearing about her death, it pains me" For a moment, Jenna had to move her face away from him, taking a deep breath to calm down. This lying bastard!

"You know, the Seven have a plan for each of us. For you, for me, for Halla. Sometimes, we don't understand every detail in their plan. At times, they might even appear cruel, but everything they do serves a greater good", he explained and Jenna couldn't believe how she ever trusted him. He was lying, she felt it. And every word of his was like poison. With every passing second, she got more convinced that he was hiding something from her.

"The Stranger is cruel", she mumbled, in an attempt of continuing the conversation without drawing his suspicion. Septon Corbin shook his head. "This is a common misconception. The Stranger simply takes those of us whose time on this world is over", he explained calmly, before his gaze hardened. "Jenna, I have to ask you something... you and Halla have seen what Harris did to Ser Ilhan. Now Halla is dead and you only narrowly survived... Can it be that Harris is behind the attack? I think he would be capable of such a thing"

At first, Jenna wanted to shake her head. She knew, it wasn't Harris. At the very least, she was reasonably sure that the acting lord was innocent of this crime. But right now, she had to please the Septon, to avoid any suspicion he may have had towards her. She shrugged. "I don't know if he did it, Septon Corbin...", she said and the Septon let out a sigh. "It was him. There is no other way. He is the only one who could hope to gain something out of your death, Jenna", he answered and sternly looked her in the eyes. "I have heard the talk in the town. The lord of Mander's Mouth has informed the king of his intentions to take control of Raylansfair. The king in turn has sent Lord Harlen Tyrell to decide in this matter", he explained. "As soon as Lord Tyrell arrived in Raylansfair, I need you to tell him what you know about Harris"

With these words, he destroyed any last doubt she had about his guilt. It was him who had told Wolfius or his employer that she knew about what Harris did. And it had been no accident either, or else he wouldn't act this way. The only thing that spoke in his favour was the hint of genuine sadness he had shown when she had revealed the death of Halla. And this made her unsure how she should continue in this matter. He was hiding something and she had to find out.

"One more question, Jenna... have you told anyone that I know what Harris did?", Corbin asked. "I'm just asking, because if you did, I might be in danger as well" Jenna looked at him and realized that she failed at hiding her anger. The Septon narrowed his brows as he gave her a questioning look. "Is everything alright, Jenna?", he asked.

"I haven't told anyone", she mumbled and a smirk appeared on his face. "Good! This is good. Until we have dealt with Harris, no one can know that I'm in on your secret", he exclaimed and Jenna closed her eyes. She had put her trust in him and in return, he barely tried to hide the fact that he betrayed her. And now she had to find a way to get this confession out of him.

Of course, the safest way would be to play his game a little longer, to lure him into a false sense of security, perhaps to trick him into revealing something by accident. But Jenna wasn't sure how much longer she could uphold this lie. Perhaps it was about time to confront him directly. It

was a bold strategy, not what she would have done usually, but what her father or Ser Ilhan would have done. Perhaps he would break down, perhaps he would confess. Or perhaps he would attack her.

Jenna clenched her fists as the thought of the Septon attacking her flashed through her mind. And there was something else. The thought of Wolfius and his knife and especially the anger she felt, at him, at everyone. She looked down and noticed that her fists were still clenched. Septon Corbin started all of this. He was the one responsible for the attack on her. And Jenna was furious about this betrayal. Perhaps it was about time to make him feel what she did, to beat the confession out of him with her bare hands!

[Try to trick him]

Maya

“So, any idea how you're going to pull this off?”, Aldrik asked, as he and Maya were lead through the long hallway that lead to the lords audience room. She shook her head and smirked at the question. “You know me, I'm going to improvise”, she answered and the knight let out a sigh. “I sincerely hope that you're going to take this seriously. The Vale needs these documents if we want to have any chance against the Storm King in the war that comes”

“I know what's at stake”, Maya reassured him sternly. “I have family in the Vale. My parents. Three younger siblings. I'll get these blasted documents for their sake” This answer seemed to please Ser Aldrik and he gave her a nod. “I'm glad to hear this, ambassador. I have trust in you. The only obstacle we need to overcome is the acting lord. From what I know, Harris Flowers has a reputation of being stubborn and distrustful towards anyone who might be a threat to his position.

Maya raised an eyebrow and shook her head. “I have no intentions of being a threat to his position”, she insisted. “I know”, Aldrik answered. “Let's hope that the lord will see it the same way” He looked at the door at the end of the hallway and at the guardsman who slowly lead them towards it. “I'm only curious why the woman at the front gate started to laugh when we asked to speak to Lord Harris”

Before Maya could answer, the guard stopped and pointed at the door. “Lord Harris and his new advisor are waiting for you”, he explained and took a deep bow in front of them. Maya pressed her lips together, slightly anxious of the talk that was going to follow. In her life, she had met only two lords and neither experience had been pleasant.

She gave Ser Aldrik a sign to enter the room first. The knight saluted in front of her, something she almost found ridiculous, before he walked towards the door, loudly knocking on it. “The door is unlocked, please come in”, a deep voice called from within. Without wasting any more time, Aldrik opened the door, stepping into the room behind.

“May I announce Lady Maya Iresons, Ambassador of Runestone and the Kingdom of Mountain and Vale”, he proclaimed with a loud voice and Maya felt her cheeks blushing at his words.

Ambassador... part of her found it ridiculous that she was awarded such a title, even if it was only a formality. She knew, she had her talents, but politics were not among them. Of course, Lord Royce had his reasons to give her this title, but that made it not less strange.

Maya was no scheming noble lady, she was born in a cottage smaller than the room she just entered, sharing it with her parents and her younger siblings for most of her life. It had been luck, good or bad, that she had beaten up a boy who tried to bully her youngest brother, right in front of Lord Royce himself. The Bronze Lord had been pleased enough with her show that he had given her a position as one of his agents. And now, five years later, it was up to her to save the whole kingdom from a warmongering whoreson. Despite her anxiety, a smirk flashed across her face. Ambassador... how ridiculous!

The room she just entered was large and well-furnished, with a warm fire burning in the fireplace and a large desk standing in the middle of the room. Behind it sat a tall man, perhaps in his fifties, with light brown hair, a bushy beard and deep green eyes. He was wearing a fine green tunic and narrowed his eyes as she walked in. Next to him stood a beautiful woman with fair skin, dark brown hair and deep blue eyes. She was wearing an elegant blue dress and was looking decidedly more approachable than the lord.

Maya walked closer and took a deep, elegant bow in front of the lord. Learning how to bow correctly had been hard for her despite the usual elegance she displayed while moving, but over the past five years, Lord Royce had taught her well. Still, right now Maya felt as if she had screwed up even this basic act of courtesy.

“Ambassador Maya Iresons...”, the lord slowly said. “I can’t say I have ever heard about House Iresons. And I can’t say I have been expecting you” He folded his hands and sternly glared at her, while Maya looked at Ser Aldrik for help. “This is correct, mylord Harris. I am not a noble lady, instead I was awarded this position for my loyal service to Lord Royce of Runestone”, she answered and immediately noticed that she had said the right thing. Harris hostile glare got slightly warmer as he gave her a nod. “I see. This is fascinating and a welcome change”, he answered and pointed at the young woman next to him.

“May I introduce you to Lady Sherryl, my trusted advisor”, he said and the woman took a bow in front of them, far more elegant than Maya’s own pathetic attempt. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, ambassador”, she said with a bright smile, but Maya also caught something in her eyes that reminded her of Lord Royce, to her horror.

Harris pointed at a chair in front of him. “Please, have a seat, ambassador. I have been surprised by your visit, or else I would have made sure to give you a more deserving welcome”, he offered and Maya gladly sat down, slightly leaning back in her chair.

"I am sorry for having to sneak into your city like a thief in the middle of the night, Lord Harris", she apologized. "But the streets are dangerous and I have only a few trusted companions with me" *And Irving, of course.*

"No offence taken, Ambassador. But why exactly does the lord of Runestone feel the need to send his ambassador to a remote town in the western Reach?", Harris asked and immediately, the distrustful glare returned. Maya hated a look like this. Lord Harris would be a lot harder to convince than even Ser Aldrik had feared.

She and her knight exchanged a short glance and Maya immediately understood that it might be a terrible thing to reveal the truth about why the Vale needed the documents from Raylansfairs archive. They would be indebted to Lord Harris, a debt someone like him would claim without a doubt. On a positive side, it was unlikely that he would refuse their pleas, as long as he would gain something out of it. The nature of these documents, on the other hand, couldn't be kept a secret for long, so Maya decided to just reveal at least a part of the truth for now.

"Lord Royce has sent me to you in a matter of great importance for the Vale", she explained. "A few hundred years ago, a king of the Mountain and Vale sold a number of documents to your archive. I come to claim them back"

Harris narrowed his eyes and exchanged a look with Sherryl, who barely shook her head.

"Claiming them back?", Harris asked and raised an eyebrow. "Why do you want to claim back some old documents?" Maya gulped, knowing fully well that it was a risky move to reveal the Vale's current situation to this man. Again, she decided to tell him a part of the truth.

"These documents are old contracts, a King of the Mountain and Vale made with the Freehold and Old Ghis several thousand years ago", she explained. "The documents survived the fall of Valyria and Ghis, but had no further value, so they were sold to your archive. Lord Royce on the other hand believes that he will be able to renew the contracts with Volantis and Slaver's Bay respectively" It was the full truth, with the exception of the most important detail, the reason they needed these contracts so desperately.

"Theoretically, ambassador, I am not willing to sell a part of my archive. No Lord Raylan has ever felt the need to do this. However, as a sign of my good will, I am willing to hear your offer", Harris growled and Maya let out a sigh of relief. The offer. Lord Royce had told her what to say in such a case.

"You need gold, don't you, Lord Harris?", she asked. "Lord Royce and King Arryn are ready to buy the documents back for four times the amount of money your predecessor had spent for them" As soon as she had said this, Harris' eyes lit up and Maya felt deep satisfaction. She started to realize why Lord Royce loved it so much to manipulate people. It wasn't as hard as she thought it would be. Promise them enough gold and they were willing to do almost anything.

“A generous offer, ambassador. I don't see any reason why...”, Harris said cheerfully, until Sherryl put a hand on his shoulder. The advisor slowly moved down towards him and started to whisper something into his ear. Harris' smile faded and the distrustful look in his eyes returned. “Good point”, he mumbled.

“Ambassador, I have realized an important detail you haven't yet specified. Why exactly is the Vale willing to spend that much money for these old contracts, on the fleeting chance that they can be renewed? The Lord Royce I have heard about is certainly not a gambler”, Sherryl said with a smirk and Maya suppressed the urge to sigh. Yes, this woman was a bitch, as expected. Seven Hells, what was she supposed to answer to this? The truth would be a risky move, but lying to these people might be even worse. Perhaps Harris would refuse to sell her the contracts if he would spot her lie, or perhaps, even worse, he would refuse to sell her the contracts if she would tell him the truth. Maya was almost certain that the Storm King would pay him just as well, if not even better for ruining the Vale's chances in the coming war.

Of course, talking to Lord Harris was only the first option and this thought helped Maya in calming down a little bit. When worse comes to worse, she could always use her real talents to get these contracts from the archive. But for now, she had to try her luck with negotiation. The way she saw it, she basically had two options here, both equally risky. The truth, or a very convincing lie. By the gods, Maya hated negotiation...

[Try to make up a convincing lie]

Torvin

Torvin forced himself to smirk at Kyra as he frantically searched for an answer. She had a good sense of humour, right? What could go wrong? His smirk turned into a big grin. “Oh, you know. Garthon is up to nothing special. Currently, he's buying poison to kill the king. You know, typical Garthon stuff. Just killing the king”, he answered and chuckled, soon noticing how stilted and fake it sounded.

Kyra's facial expression proved to him just how terrible his attempt at humouring her was. Perhaps for the first time since he met her, Kyra Greyjoy looked at him deadly serious. “Yeah, my brother is trying to do the same, although he has never been much of a poison person”, she said slowly, before her usual smirk returned. “In all seriousness, you think this is funny in any way?” She slightly rolled with her eyes and pressed her lips together. “Okay, admitted, it probably is. In the right company, that one might have been hilarious”, she added. “But... Torvin, are you out of your mind? Joking about killing the king, here in Harrenhal, especially after a day like this?”

This caused Torvin to raise his eyebrows as he gave her a questioning look. “Wait, what happened today?”, he asked. Kyra let out a sigh. “King Harren is in a terrible mood and, to be

honest, I'm not exactly thrilled about it either. We got a special delivery from the Rock, a cart containing two hundred Ironborn heads. With greetings from Willfred Reyne", she explained with a frown on her face.

Any attempt of a smirk vanished from Torvin's face. "Fuck...", he mumbled. "That's... I can understand that the king is in a bad mood. And you...", he said, but she cut him off. "I'm fine, Torvin Breaker. King Harren on the other hand... he is brooding and that is never a good thing. His vengeance on the Rock will be quick, painful and ten times worse than what this Reyne boy did", she said with a visibly upset look on her face.

"You know... can we just change the topic? Back to your brother. You were about to tell me where he is", she continued, looking at him sternly. Torvin gulped as he thought of what to say. Obviously, his attempt at a joke failed. Just telling her the full truth now was not an option either. She likely wouldn't even believe him.

"We had an argument, Garthon and me. He left the castle for a while", Torvin explained, hoping that she would believe him. The look on her face told him that she didn't. Kyra let out a sigh, before slowly backing off. "Nevermind, Torvin", she said with a disappointed tone in her voice. "I was going somewhere serious with my question, but fine, be that way"

She turned around and started to walk to the stairs. Torvin looked after her and closed his eyes. "Captain, wait!", he called her. She turned around, slowly raising an eyebrow. "What is it?", she asked. "What if...", Torvin started to say, before he cut himself off. By the Drowned God, what was he doing? "What if it wasn't a joke?"

Kyra looked up, towards the King's Tower, slowly narrowing her eyes. "Then you should better keep it a secret in this castle", she growled. "Luckily, it was a joke, right? A terrible one, but undeniably a joke" Her face was deadly serious as she said this and Torvin realized what she was doing. "Of course", he answered and she slightly relaxed. "I'm glad we understand each other, Captain Breaker", she slowly said, before turning around again. "Remember what I told you. Keep it a secret. The king has a bad sense of humour"

She didn't need to tell him. Torvin gave her a nod regardless and watched her walking down the stairs. He still had no idea what she would do now. Was she suspecting him to plot against the king? Something about Garthon's disappearance obviously stirred her interest. At worst, it was her brothers interest. He could only imagine how much worse it would be if he, a captain of the Iron Fleet, would have left the castle instead of Garthon.

As he walked down the stairs, he had to ask himself if he did the right decision with Kyra. He knew, her whole house wasn't known for its loyalty towards House Hoare. But she was Harrenhal's captain of the guard, her brother the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. So far, they had only benefited from Harren Hoare.

Kyra had already left the courtyard as Torvin finished walking down the stairs. He slightly shivered in the cold autumn night as he looked around, thinking about what he should do now. After a day like this, part of him just wanted to go to his chambers, perhaps take a hot bath. A groan forced its way out of his throat. He remembered, Gabin wanted to talk to him in the great hall. Usually, Torvin would have just ignore him, would have headed to his chambers and called it an early night. But perhaps Gabin wanted to talk about their plan. He sighed and turned towards the great hall. This better had to be something important.

Torvin knew, the main door of the great hall was already closed at this time of the night and a single man wasn't able to open it. Instead, he had to go through a number of smaller hallways, intended to allow servants and lesser thralls entrance to the great hall. The hallways were narrow and low-ceilinged, forcing Torvin to lower his head until he stepped into the hall itself. At this time, the great hall was uncomfortably dark and while a small fire was still burning in one of the fireplaces, it spent only a weak light, making the ceiling appear even larger and the walls even more distant to each other. Gabin was sitting near the fire, absent-mindedly looking into it and to Torvin's surprise, he saw Hjalgar sitting next to him.

It was Gabin who saw him first. The man raised his head and gave Torvin a tired nod. "Torvin", he greeted him. "How was your meeting with the Lord Captain?" Torvin glanced at Hjalgar, who gave him a friendly smirk in return, before answering. "Not very good. The Iron Fleet is going to war. Greyjoy wants to take Lannisport and Casterly Rock", he growled.

This caused Gabin to frown, as he slightly shook his head. "Fucking war. Each year, thousands of my people die because of it", he mumbled. "This is your war. Ironborn war. Once the king is dead, we don't have to fear these kind of things anymore"

Alarmed, Torvin looked from him to Hjalgar, noticing that both men seemed to be relatively calm and relaxed, considering what Gabin just said. Gabin followed his stare and a tired smirk formed around his mouth. "It's alright, Torvin. Hjalgar knows everything"

"What do you mean?", Torvin stuttered. "Gabin, what have you done?" The other man looked almost apologetically for a moment, before his gaze softened a bit. "After today, I trust him. Hjalgar is a good man and he suffered under the Hoares as well. He can be an ally"

Hjalgar gave him a quick nod, as if he wanted to prove how much of an ally he could be. Torvin on the other hand wasn't convinced. Sure, it was unlikely that Hjalgar would run to the king to sell them out. Unlikely, but not unthinkable. And what kind of help could he be?

As if he had read his thoughts, Hjalgar slightly rose from his seat. "You have seen me during the hunt. I am a gifted archer. I have good eyes and despite my height, I am not very noticeable. Nd the way Gabin put it, you could really need every help you can get"

Torvin did not answer at first. He grabbed Gabin at the shoulders and dragged him away from the fireplace. "Can I talk to you for a moment?", he growled, noticing the expression of surprised

shock on Gabin's face. "Torvin, I can understand if you are...", he started to say, but Torvin cut him off. "Are you out of your mind?", he yelled at him loudly and clenched his fists.

Gabin raised his arms, expecting a punch that never came. Instead, Torvin just stood there, boiling with anger. "It is as Hjalgar said, we need every help we can get", he defended himself. "We need him" Torvin shook his head. "We don't need him!", he insisted. "Even if we can trust him, do you really want to drag him into this?"

"Excuse me!", Hjalgar's voice sounded. Torvin hadn't even noticed that he had raised from his chair and walked closer towards them. Not very noticeable indeed, he had to give him that.

"What is it?", he growled and noticed the defiant look in Hjalgar's eyes. "The way I see it, I am already dragged into this. Harmund Hoare nearly killed me. Harlan Hoare considers me a friend. After what happened today, whether I like it or not, I am already involved in this"

Torvin shifted his glare back to Gabin, who seemed almost apologetic. "Hjalgar is right. Even before I told him about our plan, he was already involved in this. And now... Torvin, we have to let him help. What do you want to do against it, do you want to kill him?"

This caused Hjalgar to make a jump back as a frightened expression flashed over his face.

"Killing me?", he exclaimed. "But... No! I have done nothing wrong! Torvin, I am on your side in this. Do you think I would betray you for these monsters? I have seen what Harlan Hoare is capable of!"

Torvin shook his head, remembering the dungeons. "No, you don't, trust me", he mumbled, as his glare hardened. "And you don't want to be part of this. It is too dangerous for you. I won't kill you, be assured. But if you want to help us, it is very likely that Harren Hoare will do it for me in time"

Now it was up to Hjalgar to glare at Torvin in anger. "So, you're just sending me away? This is my decision, Torvin, not yours. Now that I'm acquainted with the king's sons, killing him might be my only chance to live a peaceful life. I know the risks and I am willing to take them. Please, Torvin. Allow me to help you"

[Accept Hjalgar's help]

Lucas

His hand was still thumping with agony as Lucas slowly opened his eyes. Darkness was greeting him. The Sphynx had stayed true to his promise and in a painfully slow session he had removed the fingernails on Lucas' left hand. Lucas grimaced in pain as he tried to move the wounded limb. Of course, the Sphynx hadn't cleaned his wounds, leaving them exposed to the open air. And soon, the pain made Lucas wish that he could just answer the Sphynx' question. It was always the same. Where was Dairon? Every time the pliers moved to the next finger and

the Sphynx' interrupted his twisted nursery rhyme, he had asked this question. And every time, Lucas had refused to answer.

Even now, he wanted to do nothing more than to give in, to obey his torturers orders and to answer his questions. But he knew, Mullendore and the Sphynx wouldn't allow him to go. They would kill him and then they would do the same to Dairon. And gods knew what they did to Leonard at the moment. No, he couldn't tell them anything. Still, the thought of what the Sphynx would do to him next made him shiver.

He almost cringed as the creaking sound of the door was heard, as the dim light of a torch filled the room. Through narrowed eyes, he saw the slim silhouette of Conor entering the room, carrying a small bucket. The boy had a characteristically wolfish grin on his face as his eyes moved towards Lucas' wounded hand. "Good morning", he mockingly greeted him. Morning? How long had he been here already? A day? A week? Lucas' sense of time was all but gone at the moment.

"They Shpynx has sent me, to bring you a reward", Conor explained and caught Lucas' surprised look. "You did nothing, Lucas. But Leonard, he was a good boy and answered some of our questions, as soon as the Sphynx started to remove a few unnecessary fingers. As a reward, you're both going to get your wounds cleaned" He looked down onto Lucas' wounded hand and once again, a smirk appeared on his face. "That sure has to hurt, huh?", he grinned. Lucas suppressed the urge to insult the boy, instead he only managed to nod, trying his best not to show the extent of his pain in front of him. Conor still seemed to realize in how much pain Lucas had to be, judging from his grin. He put the bucket onto the table and revealed a wet towel. "As I said, you're being rewarded. Should you see Leonard again, you can thank him", he explained and his grin turned into a smirk. "Although it is unlikely that you'll ever see him again" "What have you done to him?", Lucas exclaimed, although his voice wasn't more than a whisper. Conor shrugged. "Personally? Nothing. It was the Sphynx who did it. I just watched and learned and I was very, very entertained", he revealed with a grin. Lucas let out a disgusted noise. To think that he had a teenage boy in front of him..."You're sick", Lucas hissed as an answer.

Conor shook his head. "This city is sick", he insisted, although it sounded more as if he was just repeating empty phrases. Lucas looked up, hoping for a short moment that he could learn something about the boy, something he could use against him. "You don't believe this?", he asked.

"It's not only this city", Conor answered and Lucas let out a sigh. "It's the world. All of their petty rules, their fake morality, it is disgusting. My brother, he taught me how to things really work" This sparked Lucas' interest again. "Your brother?", he asked.

Conor gave him a nod. "The Sphynx", he explained. "Well, not this Sphynx. The Sphynx is not a name, you know. It's a title. Our organization is rule by the Tom. I'm not even sure if he is the first Tom, but I know for sure that the current Sphynx is not the first Sphynx. My brother Lupin, he has been the Sphynx for a long time and he was the reason I even joined our group"

He moved down towards Lucas' hand and touched the wounded fingers with the cold, wet towel. Lucas cringed in pain, but soon relaxed slightly as he realized that the pain started to get a bit more tolerable. "That's nice, huh?", Conor remarked. "You could have that the whole time instead of the pain the Sphynx will put you through. Why don't you just give in?"

"You're going to kill me", Lucas mumbled weakly. "As soon as I have no more use for you, you're going to kill me" Conor made no attempt of denying it. Instead, he only gave Lucas a nod as he continued to clean his wounds. "You're going to die either way, Lucas. The only thing that matters is how much of you is going to be left when Maron kills you. If you give in, you can spare yourself a lot of pain"

"I can deal with the pain", Lucas insisted defiantly, knowing fully well that he was lying. "But I can't deal with the thought of what you're going to do to Dairon once you have him" This caused Conor to let out an amused chuckle. "What do you think Maron is going to do to him? He is not a kinslayer!", he exclaimed, momentarily squeezing Lucas' wounded fingers. The pain was enough to make Lucas moan in pain.

"What is it, little piggy?", Conor asked, his voice reeking with hatred. "You got a boo-boo?" He started to squeeze the fingers a bit harder, causing nearly unbearable pain to burn through Lucas' hand. "Tell me, where is Dairon?", he growled, speaking a bit louder than before.

"Conor!", a new voice sounded and both, Lucas and Conor cringed back as they recognized it. Through the open door walked the Sphynx. His face was hidden behind a black mask, as always, but the look in his dark eyes was full of anger. It was the first time that Lucas had heard the Sphynx raising his voice and the effect caused him to shiver.

"Sphynx... I... I was just...", Conor stuttered. "I already started with the interrogation" The Sphynx did not answer at first. Instead, the lean man walked up towards the boy and raised his hand, which was enough for Conor to cower in obvious fear. "What have I told you about the interrogation?", the masked man asked, now calm as always.

"I have to wait for you", Conor repeated quickly and Lucas saw that he was full of fear, looking at the Sphynx' raised hand with widely opened eyes. "Have you learned your lesson?", the Sphynx asked with a threatening voice. Conor gave him a quick nod and the man lowered his hand again, causing Conor to let out a sigh of relief. "I forgive you, Conor...", the Sphynx said with a soft voice, before quickly raising his hand again and striking the boy in the face.

"And now to you", he continued towards Lucas, while Conor fell to the floor and held his cheek. The Sphynx gaze moved down towards Lucas fingers and as Lucas followed his gaze, he

noticed that Conor had caused his already wounded fingertips to bleed. "Conor started rough with you already...", the Sphynx mumbled and took the seat in front of Lucas. "I'm afraid today won't be as entertaining as last time. I don't want to kill you, not until Maron allows it. Aside from that, we already know each other and there is no real need to strengthen our friendship"

Despite the fact that the mask was concealing a majority of the face, Lucas was sure that the Sphynx started to grin. "You don't just want to tell me what I want to know, right?", he asked and Lucas shook his head. "Never", he answered.

The hidden grin got even wider as the Sphynx chuckled. "Excellent. And here I was, fearing that it could be another boring afternoon" He moved his hand to his belt, pulling out a small knife.

"The question will be the same as usual. Depending on your choices, we might be able to end today's session a little early. It won't be our last, as there might be some new questions for later", he explained and with a sudden movement, he rammed the knife into the table, causing Lucas' to cringe. "Very good, Ser Lucas. I see you are already in the right mood. Today, we're going to finish our work from the last time"

His hands grabbed the knife, as he slowly pulled it out of the table again. "You know the deal, little piggy", he chuckled as he hovered the edge of the knife above Lucas' right hand. Even though the Sphynx hadn't made a cut yet, Lucas already felt uncomfortable with the knife so close.

"You still don't want to tell me?", the Sphynx asked. Lucas narrowed his eyes and weakly shook his head. "You don't want to let me go?", he asked in return. The Sphynx let out a short, high-pitched laughter and shook his masked head. "I see, you still have a good sense of humour", he grinned. "We'll see how long this will last"

All of a sudden, even the hint of warmth vanished out of the Sphynx' eyes as he grabbed Lucas' left hand. "Why don't we raise the stakes a little bit?", he hissed. "Last time, I removed a nail each time you refused to answer... this time, I think I'm going to take the whole finger, like I did with Leonard"

As if he wanted to prove it, he grabbed Lucas left pinky finger and moved the edge of the knife close towards it, causing Lucas to start breathing heavily. Yes, he was afraid, he was very afraid. "I'm going to tell you how it works, Ser Lucas. First, I'm going to remove your pinky finger. If that is not enough to give me the answers I want, I'll take both of your thumbs. Afterwards, perhaps your eyes, if you refuse to tell me where Dairon is hiding"

He caught the desperate look in Lucas' eyes and slightly shook his head. "I'm not sure if you know what is at stake for you... answer me!", he growled, albeit Lucas noticed something new, something unexpected and terrifying. He noticed the hint of anger in the Sphynx' voice and he wasn't sure if this was a good or a bad sign. His gaze fell upon his wounded hand and he

shivered in the thought of the pain that would follow... at least if he wouldn't sell Dairon out like a coward. He wasn't a coward, right? And still, at this moment, Lucas Flowers was afraid.

[Stay silent]

Garthon

Garthon moved a hand to his scabbard, noticing that the knight in front of him was certainly ready to strike first and willing to let things escalate if Garthon wouldn't follow his orders.

Fortunately, Garthon had little interest in provoking this man. With slow movements, he removed the scabbard from his belt, slowly handing it to the knight, who grabbed it impatiently.

"It's 'Rickard', isn't it?", he asked, trying to lighten the mood. The knight answered with a frown.

"Ser Rickard for you, Ironborn", he growled and shot a glare at George. "If your new friend tries any tricks, George, your allegiance to Tully won't protect you"

George decidedly shook his head and reciprocated the knight's glare. "You don't trust him?"

Garthon has proven himself to be loyal", he insisted. Rickard shook his head. "Boy, I am here for one thing only: To protect Lord Bracken, from any kind of danger. Bad enough that he has to be here with that Blackwood bastard. An Ironborn near him only puts him into more danger", he answered.

Before George could say another word, Garthon quickly raised his hands, in an attempt to defuse the situation. "No tricks", he promised, although he noticed that Ser Rickard looked less than convinced about this. "We'll see", the knight growled and took a step aside. "After you, Ironborn. And keep your hands where I can see them"

Garthon gave him a reassuring nod, before stepping past the knight and into the small house. It was a bit larger than a common smallfolk house, but apparently abandoned for a long time now. The room he entered likely wasn't more than a small entrance room, not furnished at all, the walls and the wooden ground stained with mud. A wooden door lead deeper into the house. It was a perfect hideout for a group of Riverlords plotting to overthrow a king. Garthon knew, a man like Harren would never assume that someone would plot his downfall here.

"This is unacceptable, Blackwood!", an angry voice hissed from behind a door. "I had a deal with Edmyn and I'm not willing to change the plan in the slightest" In response, something heavy hit on wood and Garthon stopped walking towards the door for a moment. "Seven Hells, Bracken! We got to be more careful here!", a second voice shouted.

"More careful my ass! The tyrant bled us dry long enough. Keep in mind, I have the biggest risk here!", the first voice countered. "I disagree, Tytos. It is apparent that I have the biggest risk here", a third, calm voice answered. "If we fail, Seagard will burn first. I agree with Petyr, we have to be more careful"

“Well, then I agree with Tytos!”, a fourth voice growled. “Killing the tyrant and his wretched family has to be our main goal. My son is in that castle, for fucks sake!” “Brandon, when will you realize that no one in this bloody room cares for your son?”, the second voice answered and Garthon heard a surprised gasp coming from the fourth voice. He decided that this would be the moment for him to have a grand entrance, before things would escalate further. With quick movements, he stepped towards the door and opened it, slowly walking into the room behind.

“Mylords, mylords!”, he exclaimed, raising his hand in an attempt to calm the riverlords down. Five men sat around an old wooden table, the only piece of furniture in the whole room, looking at him, their facial expressions ranging from angry to pleased. At the table's corners sat two men who were eyeing each other with hostility. The one on the far left was about fifty years old, a tall, but overweight man with a few sad strains of grey hair remaining on his head. A long, unkempt beard fell down onto his chest, almost concealing sigil of House Blackwood, showing a white weirwood tree on a black field, surrounded by a flock of ravens on a red ground.

On the other side of the table sat a man who, according to the red stallion on his tabard, was without a doubt Tytos Bracken, the lord of Stone Hedge. Bracken was a few years older than Lord Blackwood, but thinner, more muscular, with full, brown hair and a harsh and unforgiving look in his blue eyes. Garthon knew, since the Age of Heroes a bitter feud has been between the Brackens and the Blackwoods. It spoke for both, Lord Tully's charisma and his desperation that he managed to get both of them to sit at the same table.

To Lord Bracken's right sat a man Garthon had briefly met on his last trip to Seagard. At the age of thirty, Lord Arrec Mallister was by far the youngest riverlord at the table, though in Garthon's opinion he was also the smartest. He had an unassuming, boyish face and short blonde hair, but keen brown eyes and a soft, calculating voice.

The man who opposed him at the table was his complete opposite. Garthon had never met him, but he needed no introduction. Brandon Frey, lord of the Crossing, was undoubtedly the tallest man in the room and probably also the strongest, a champion of countless tourneys and a hero of war. The gods he believed had a cruel sense of humour when they gave him a weak chin and a weasely face, unfittingly thin for his broad shoulders and only weakly covered by his short beard. The smallfolk called him Bloody Brandon, not only because of his bright red hair, but mainly because of his famed lust for violence. Whenever this man was grabbing a weapon, someone was about to die.

And at the head of the table, surrounded by these riverlords, sat Lord Edmyn Tully, the only one who seemed genuinely pleased to see Garthon. He even gave him a slight smile, which got only wider as George entered the room. “Mylords, this argument has ended. These men are George Rivers and...”, he started, before being cut off by Lord Bracken. “And a bloody Ironborn, yeah. No introductions needed”

Garthor wasn't surprised by the riverlords' hostility. Frey and Bracken had suffered personally under Harren Hoare. Blackwood had a famous hatred towards his people and Mallister was nothing more than a glorified castellan in his own castle thanks to Harren Hoare. Only Tully's apparent friendliness was a bit off-putting in Garthor's opinion.

"And Garthor Breaker", Tully completed his sentence, sending a cold glare towards Bracken.

"Please, come closer, show us what you bought in Maidenpool" He made an inviting hand gesture and Garthor started to walk towards the riverlords, feeling cold glares coming from almost all of them. Mallister was the only one aside from Tully who did not look at him with clear hatred, although the young lord still had a somewhat resentful look in his eyes.

Garthor put his hand to the small bag he was wearing on his belt and even though he couldn't see him, he heard Ser Rickard putting a hand on the hilt of his sword, clearly ready to strike at Lord Bracken's orders. The thought was frightening, given Bracken's hatred for the Ironborn.

And a second thought was accompanying it. These people, who had more in common with him than his own, they would never accept him. No matter what he would do, the Riverlands were full with people like Bracken or Blackwood, who would hate him simply for not being born as one of them.

Slowly, he pulled the small crossbow out of the bag, putting it onto the table, so that the Riverlords got a good look on it. Arrec Mallister looked almost impressed for a moment and Petyr Blackwood's frown thankfully faded. Brandon Frey on the other hand looked displeased at the tiny weapon. "The hell is this?", he growled. Instead of Garthor, Lord Tully opened his mouth to answer. "That, my friend, is a crossbow"

"Yeah, I can see that", Frey growled. "The question is, how do you want to kill the king with a crossbow as tiny as that? He's wearing his black armour every time he goes out of his chambers. I bet he even pisses and sleeps and fucks in that thing" Garthor gave him a short nod. "He probably does", he answered, to his own surprise. "That's why we acquired this particular weapon. May I?"

He moved the hand back towards the crossbow, noticing how Lord Frey narrowed his eyes. His other hand moved back into the bag, pulling out a small bolt. "This crossbow has the advantage that it does not lose a lot of strength, despite its small size. The downsides are...", he explained and stopped as he quickly tried to put the bolt into the crossbow. "The downsides are the long reloading time and the fact that the weapon is less than reliable when used over long periods of time" A smile flashed across his face as he looked at Lord Tully. "And the fact that it is sinfully expensive of course", he added, finishing to put the bolt into the crossbow.

"Care for a demonstration, mylords?", he asked, moving around to face Ser Rickard. The knight was looking from him to Lord Bracken, but surprisingly, he hadn't drawn his sword yet, apparently waiting for a signal from his lord. For a moment, Garthor and Rickard stared at each

other, before the Ironborn raised the weapon, firing a bolt into the wall next to the knight. With a pleased smirk, he noticed that Rickard slightly shivered as he had fired the crossbow. Without saying another word, he put the crossbow back onto the table and started to walk towards the bolt. "From a distance of, say, five feet, this thing is deadly. As you can see, it pierced at least three inches through the wall. A man would be dead by now, if hit in the right places"

"True", Lord Frey admitted. "But we're talking about a wooden wall here. I'd say your tiny weapon will hardly manage to penetrate real armour, Ironborn" Garthor gave him a nod. "But we only need to cause a minor wound to Harren to kill him", he revealed and walked back towards the table, pulling out the small vial from his pocket. He presented the vial proudly, noticing the pleased look on Tully's face. Lord Mallister was the first to realize what he was looking at. "The Strangler...", he mumbled.

Garthor gave him a nod. "The Strangler. A tiny wound, infested with even a drop of this and the king will die in pain", he explained and noticed the smirk flashing across Mallister's face. He realized that despite his seeming harmlessness, the lord of Seagard was the most dangerous man in this room. While Tully and Bracken looked reluctant, Lord Blackwood and Lord Frey looked outright disgusted at the poison. Only Arrec Mallister had no apparent problem with poisoning the tyrant.

"No fucking way", Lord Frey growled and Lord Blackwood viciously shook his head. "Edmyn, that is not right", he mumbled, looking at Lord Tully. "I mean, the king has to die, but killing him like this is dishonourable!"

"Fitting for a Blackwood", Tytos Bracken mumbled, earning himself an angry glare from Lord Blackwood. "And yet you seem less hesitant, Bracken", he spat. Bracken gave him a tired nod. "Because assassinating a king is not honourable at all, no matter how we're doing it. We all knew this when we agreed to this little alliance"

Brandon Frey mumbled something, before raising from his chair, slamming a fist onto the table. "Mylords, this is not right. Poison is a woman's weapon, or that of an eunuch", he growled and looked at Garthor. "Are you a eunuch, Ironborn, or are you a woman? No? Well, you're sure as hell acting like one" He looked back at Lord Tully. "Edmyn, we don't need this ridiculous crossbow or the cowards weapon. Your man Gabin can bring us close to the king. All I need is my axe and twenty good men"

"And what then, Brandon?", Mallister asked with a mocking voice. "You slaughter the king and his sons and think you'll just walk out of the castle alive? At least with Edmyn's plan, the killers have a chance to escape" Frey shook his head. "Escaping is not my goal. I just want to make them pay for what they did. And I have to get my son out of there", he explained and looked at

Garthon, a lot of rage fading from his tired, blue eyes. "Tell me, Ironborn, and be honest. Have you seen my son? Is he okay?"

A sting of pity flashed through Garthon as he remembered Bloody Brandon's son. Adrew Frey, Harren's squire. When he first arrived at Harrenhal, two years ago, Adrew had been enthusiastic about serving the king, doing every task to perfection. But it was impossible to please Harren. Garthon remembered how, over the next months, the smile slowly faded from the boy's face, something that had been painful to watch.

"We have to get him out of there", Garthon mumbled as he remembered the day he had seen Adrew with a black eye from one of Harren's tantrums. Lord Frey gave him a sad nod. "See, Edmyn? Even the Ironborn agrees", he mumbled. "We can't take any chances here. A small group of soldiers that massacres the king and all of his sons is a safe bet"

"As well as suicide", Lord Blackwood interjected. "I trust in Edmyn's plan. He has lead us good so far" This caused Lord Bracken to shake his head. "Perhaps a combination of both. We go with Edmyn's plan to kill the king, but if that fails, we use Brandon and his men as a back-up plan", he suggested.

Now it was up to Blackwood to shake his head. "Only a Bracken could be that stupid", he growled. "We only have one try. We either do it subtly, or we just allow Brandon to charge into the king's chambers in the silly hope that his personal guards won't stop him"

"Perhaps there is a third way", Lord Mallister mumbled, causing the attention to shift to him. "It is a relatively new thought and, of course, I have to work on a more detailed plan, but what happens after the king and his sons are dead? Do you think there will be peace, all of a sudden? We live in an occupied kingdom. We can't just cut off the snake's head"

"What are you suggesting?", Tully mumbled and Garthon noticed that the lord of Riverrun had his eyes narrowed, looking displeased at Mallister's suggestion. "The king has to die, I think we all agreed to this"

Mallister gave him a nod. "We did, Edmyn. But what happens afterwards? After House Hoare is gone, the throne will go to the next powerful house. Perhaps there will be a civil war, but knowing the Ironborn and knowing us, mylords, we won't even manage to mobilize our troops until the next king sits on the Seastone Chair", he explained. "And if we kill Harren, the next king will be without a doubt Damon Greyjoy"

"Vickon", Blackwood mumbled. "Vickon is the older brother" Mallister gave him a nod. "Aye, but Vickon is recovering from his wounds and he is back at Pyke, while Damon is here, he is cunning and he is ruthless", he answered calmly. "I say, instead of killing the king, we cripple his power first. We join forces and in a surprising attack, we burn down the Iron Fleet at Seagard"

"Leaving Stone Hedge and Raventree Hall vulnerable to the Iron Army in the process", Lord Bracken snarled. "This plan is shit, but what can I expect from a Mallister?" For the first time,

Garthon saw something that resembled irritation in Arrec Mallister's calm eyes. "Excuse me?", he asked. "My plan is the only way we can free ourselves from the Ironborn. Isn't that what we all want? Harren is going to die on another day, but first we have to make sure that his successor won't destroy us all"

"Eh, don't be angry at him, boy", Lord Blackwood proclaimed, to Garthon's surprise. The lord of Raventree Hall shot the lord of Stone Hedge a triumphant grin. "Bracken just has no problems with kneeling. It's all he's good for" He and Lord Bracken glared at each other with hatred in their eyes. "After all, if it weren't for his house, we would have never been conquered by the Ironborn...", Blackwood growled slowly.

This sentence caused Bracken to jump up in fury. "Without my ancestors, we would still be ruled by the Storm Kings!", he shouted. "Don't you dare questioning my loyalty, Blackwood! It was your ancestor who lost the resistance against the Ironborn!"

Lord Blackwood raised from his chair as well, his eyes narrowed. "Because you Brackens stabbed her in the back when she needed you the most!", he spat, as both lord glared at each other. "Mylords, mylords!", Lord Frey shouted even louder. "This leads to nothing! We have to stay united if we want to defeat the Ironborn!"

Out of the corner of his eyes, Garthon saw Arrec Mallister leaning backwards on his chair, a smug smirk on his face. Lord Tully on the other hand held his head in obvious displeasure, as he raised from the chair. He grabbed Frey by the shoulder, whispering something in his ear, before slowly stumbling towards the door. "Garthon, with me", he commanded and his tone made it clear that Garthon should better follow this order.

Both men walked out of the house, leaving George, Ser Rickard and the arguing Riverlords behind. Tully was still holding his head in obvious pain and Garthon gave him a worried look. "Is everything alright, Lord Tully?", he asked. The riverlord shook his head. "Headaches", he revealed. "I have them occasionally and they get worse in situations like this. Look at them, Garthon. Riverlords... The sole reason why we can never form a united kingdom"

Garthon raised an eyebrow at this remark and shot a questioning look towards Tully. "Don't you think you're a little too hard on them?", he asked. Tully shook his head. "Of course, our border situation isn't ideal, but our internal situation is even worse. Riverlords have always been first and foremost greedy, selfish and petty in their rivalries", he explained.

He paused for a moment and let out a sigh, before he continued. "When Arlan Durrandon conquered the Riverlands, every lord fought for himself, refusing to aid their neighbours. One by one, the might of Storm's End crushed them. And when Harwyn Hardhand and his Ironborn launched their war against the Stormlanders, Agnes Blackwood lead a powerful resistance against both of them. In an attempt to crown himself King of the Trident, Lothar Bracken turned against her and brought her to Hardhand, who rewarded him by starving him to death", Tully

continued. "A Blackwood never marches with a Bracken, a Frey naturally despises the Pipers and Darrys. And somehow, everyone expects me to unite them"

"You don't want to?", Garthon asked in surprise. Tired and trembling, Tully shook his head. "The Riverlands are strong, you know. Alone, we're nothing more than small streams. But united by a powerful leader, we can be so much more...", he explained and let out a long sigh. "Right now, I am the only leader we have. I would prefer a better man in my position, but this is a childish hope"

Both men looked towards the horizon, where the hulking silhouette of Harrenhal was visible.

"Why do you want to speak to me, Lord Tully?", Garthon asked, without moving his eyes away from the castle. Tully looked at him sternly. "Bracken and Blackwood will do everything to harm each other. Mallister will never do anything he won't benefit from. And Frey... don't get me started about Bloody Brandon Frey", he growled. "You on the other hand, you are a bit like me. You're not in this for your own gain, but for something else. For your family. And you are reasonable and intelligent"

He pointed back at the house. "Sadly, so are they, each on their own. Mallister is cunning, Frey an experienced commander. Their advice might be useful for our cause", he explained and closed his eyes. "And I... well, I could need another advice, from the one man I know who has no selfish motive at all to help us. What do you think? Should I stick to the original plan? Or should I follow Lord Mallisters advice and target the Iron Fleet first, in the hopes that we manage to survive Harren's wrath until we get another opportunity to kill him? Or perhaps you want to put your trust in Lord Frey and his twenty good men, to kill the tyrant with brute force where subtlety might fail?"

[Advice him to stick with the original plan]

Ilish

"Careful, girl!", the loud man called and Ilish rolled her eyes. She had expected him to object, but his booming voice nearly caused the horse she was just caring for to cringe back. It was a fine mare, the colour of ebony, a tall and muscular animal that belonged to the Lord of Mander's Mouth. A horse bred for tourneys, bred for war. And it was the first horse of that kind Ilish had to care for. However, she was also the only person working at the inn who had actual experience when it came to work with any kind of horse.

Even though Hobert's soldier was annoying her to no end, a rare smile found its way onto her face as the memory of her families farm far up in the North came to mind. No matter how bad it ended for everyone, there had been some good times in her childhood, together with her parents and with her brother. Of course, the horses back home had been skinny and weak creatures, not comparable to the beautiful animal she had in front of her now.

"Do you listen? Be careful with her!", the soldier called her again. Ilish knew, he was drunken. To her luck, she wasn't the one who had to serve them when they came in earlier this night and tried to 'occupy' the tavern for their lord. This questionable honour went to her best friend Daisy, who did a good job in fulfilling the men's requests for ever more alcohol. Now most of them had been passed out and Daisy was busy cleaning up the mess they left behind. This one had proven to be too stubborn to just fall into an alcohol-induced sleep. His name was Malkolm Sternhelm, as he had rather loudly proclaimed when he led her to the stables, to care for the lords horse. Ilish made sure to remember his name.

"I know what I'm doing", she snapped back at him, causing him to raise an eyebrow. He was a truly huge man, broad-shouldered, heavily muscled, with a bald head and a long, brown beard that thankfully hid the majority of his ugly face, but failed to hide the deep scar that went from his left temple all the way down to the right side of his jaw. "Keep in mind whom your talking to, girl...", he growled and she forced herself to give him a smile. "I'm sorry, Ser. It has been a long night. Perhaps I can bring you something to drink?", she answered.

The mention of more alcohol caused a stupid grin to appear on his face, befitting to the general opinion Ilish got about this man. But it also caused him to get significantly more friendly towards her. "Now, that's an offer. Perhaps you're good for something after all. I'll take another mug of your finest. The lord is paying!", he proclaimed and Ilish's smile got even more forced than before. Of course, the lord was paying. "And when you're back, I show you how to deal with a horse like this. You have to tread her gently, you know!", he added and Ilish seriously doubted that he even knew the meaning of the word 'gentle'.

It was a good opportunity to get away from him and Ilish gladly took it. After all, when had she ever wasted an opportunity? She went out of the inns stables and took a deep breath of the cold nightly air. During chilly autumn nights like these, the warm Reach almost felt a bit like home, where even the Summer had been cold. It brought back memories of laughter and love, but also of death and despair. The broken look in her brothers eyes as he buried their father next to their mother. Then there was the spark of anger as he left her behind and never returned. Carvin was the only family she had left and she wasn't sure if she would take him back after all that happened.

As Ilish turned around, she bumped into someone, who quickly grabbed her by the shoulders. She let out a muffled scream, more out of surprise than out of actual fear, as she reached behind her back, her fingers grabbing the short knife she carried with her. "Careful where you step, honey", a familiar voice called her out and Ilish let out a sigh, letting go of her knife, as her hands moved downwards, grabbing the man's belt and pushing him away from her. "Alan Harking", she growled. "What are you doing here?"

Alan had the grin of a truly drunken man on his face, clearly showing that he could desperately need a good night full of sleep. For any other man, Ilish would have brought him to his home by now, to make sure that he wouldn't have to sleep outside, but he... after a full day in which he was effectively harassing her, she had enough of him. Ilish knew, she wasn't a great beauty. Her whole body was a bit too skinny for her own taste, her face nothing special and her hair, while comfortable for her, was cut far too short for the tastes of most men. But considering how much Daisy had to endure because of her beauty, Ilish was rather glad about her own plain looks. However, for some reason Alan Harking showed clear and unwanted interest in her.

She moved her hands behind her back again, so that he couldn't see what she was holding, as she attempted to push herself past her. Alan's supposedly charming grin got a bit wider. "Was just outside to take a piss, when I saw the most beautiful barmaid in Raylansfair", Alan revealed and Ilish rolled her eyes. His charm reminded her of a particularly disgusting cockroach. "You're talking about Daisy and you're pissed drunken", she answered.

"No!", Alan protested. "I mean, yes, perhaps I had a drink too much. That can happen to a hard-working fellow, such as me. But I'm not talking about that Daisy girl. She's that cute redhead, right? No, I'm talking about you" He gave her a sly smile and she let out a sigh. "You're wasting your time, Alan", she answered softly, but sternly.

Alan frowned slightly, as he shook his head. "Why? I mean, you've been here the whole day. I've been here the whole day. We talked. We laughed. Well, I laughed. But you smirked, that one time. There's this special connection between us. You're a classy girl. And, well... you can't go any more classy than me"

Ilish raised an eyebrow, as she finally stepped past him, putting her hands towards the front, so that he was still not seeing what she held in them. "Okay... do you mind if I won't even bother with answering?", she asked and before he was able to answer her, she continued. "No? Great. Glad we talked about this. Now, do me a favour and go home. Alone"

She walked into the tavern, leaving a visibly baffled Alan behind. He said something else, but she wasn't bothering with listening to him anymore. What a prick! At first, Ilish had found him somewhat amusing, even had enough courtesy to laugh at some of his unsavoury jokes. But the day went on, her smiles got forced until they fully disappeared and his face started to appear more and more alluring for her closed fist. A grin appeared on her face as she looked down towards her hands, holding Alan Harking's purse in them. When had she ever wasted an opportunity?

As she looked up, she once again noticed how full the tavern was tonight. Aside from the dozen men from Mander's Mouth, Ilish registered a surprisingly large number of strangers. There was a tall, red-haired man who was apparently friends with Alan now, talking to the chubby man from the Vale. There were soldiers from the Rock, sitting in a side room and loudly requiring more

drinks. A group of half a dozen armed strangers had managed to get a large table for themselves, sitting there oddly disciplined. During a day like this, Daisy and her cousin Megur both had to work alongside Ilish to fulfil the needs of the guests.

Behind the counter, Ilish saw the owner of the tavern and a smile appeared on her face. Audrey Marigold was in more than one way the complete opposite of Ilish. Where Ilish was thin, Audrey was incredibly obese, her vibrant red hair contrasting with the slight tan she had put on during the warmer days of the early autumn. Her blue eyes had a lively look inside of them and even in situations where Ilish would frown, Audrey's smile never vanished. She was old enough to be Ilish's mother and in some way, Ilish always felt secure when being near her. The older woman gave her a big grin as she saw her approaching.

"Come over here, girl!", she exclaimed. "How'd it go with that soldier?" Ilish slightly shook her head as she walked behind the counter, her gaze moving towards the multitude of guests inside of the taproom. Audrey's daughter Megur was serving a group of soldiers from Mander' Mouth, while Daisy, Megur's cousin, was serving a group of sellswords who had arrived with the men from the Rock. Both girls were around Ilish's age and displayed the vibrant red hair Audrey's family was known for. Whereas Megur was as round and chubby as her mother, Daisy possessed all the beauty her aunt and cousin were lacking. In Megur's case, this included inner beauty. With a disgusted frown, Ilish saw one of the soldiers giving Daisy a hard slap on the bum.

"Why don't you just throw them out, Audrey?", she asked, noticing that the innkeeper's facial expression mirrored her own. "They come here and act as if they own this place" Audrey gave her a reluctant nod. "I'd like to, girl. But the sad thing is, they might own the place soon", she answered, before her gaze hardened. In a quick movement, she grabbed the large, iron spoon she was always wearing at her belt and slammed it onto the hand of the red-haired sellsword who was sitting at the counter, as he had just tried to pour himself another mug of beer as she wasn't watching. "Oh no, Marak!", she yelled. "If you want more, you're going to pay, like everyone else!"

The sellsword held his hand in slight pain and gave the large woman an intimidated nod. "Got no more money, ma'am", he mumbled weakly, but Audrey was already done with paying attention to him. "Customers...", she growled with a low voice, while winking at Ilish. "At least this lord is paying good money. Throwing them out won't be worth the trouble that follows. Besides, Daisy is a strong girl. She can handle them"

Ilish shivered as she remembered the last time Audrey thought one of her girls could handle a difficult customer. Back then, she had to thank Richard, Philip and Urid for intervening when this strange man had harassed her. Wolfius Woodbark... Ilish was glad that at least someone had the guts to stand up for him back then.

The feeling of Audrey's massive hand resting on her shoulder. "I need you to bring that to the mercenaries", she revealed and pointed at the long table that was occupied by a group of armed strangers. Ilish pressed her lips together. The soldiers from Mander's Mouth were bad news. The soldiers from the Rock probably even worse. But these men... she had no idea whom they were working for, she only knew that they drank not even nearly enough for a group of mercenaries in a tavern. Apparently, Audrey was about to change that. Without saying another word, she handed Ilish a dangerously heavy tray and flashed her a motherly smile, before something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. "Marak!", she yelled and raised her massive iron spoon, as the Ironborn once more tried to fill his empty mug on his own. Ilish suppressed a smirk at the mercenaries pained howl, as she cut her way through the mass of customers. Even though the tavern was unusually full with strangers, most of the customers were people she knew and somewhat trusted. A glance was enough to prevent anyone from getting in her way. When she was younger, Ilish had never thought of becoming a barmaid one day and even when she started, at the lowest point in her life, she never thought that she would ever feel how she felt right now. She felt home.

The strange mercenaries were sitting at their table with a frightening discipline, talking about something in a surprisingly low tone. Not even the most well-trained soldiers Ilish had ever encountered managed to stay that calm, given their surroundings and the fact that they were about to get some ale. They wore a mixture of brown leather armour and chainmail, and rather disturbingly, Ilish spotted no sigil or the sign of a sellsword company on them. Their leader was easily distinguishable, a very tall and broad-shouldered man, with a shaved head and a brown beard, a man who slightly reminded her of Malkolm, the guardsman she... oh, shit, the guardsman she had left at the stables. That was bound to cause trouble...

As soon as she walked up to the table, the conversation died. Half a dozen almost hostile glares were shot at her. Ilish forced herself to smile, as she attempted to make the best out of that situation. "Your order", she said with a strained smile, as she put the tray onto the table. At least this time, the men gave her cheerful smiles, although it only made them look more like wolves. The leader wasn't smiling. Without even wanting it, Ilish's gaze fell at the sword that was leaning next to his chair and she actually had to force herself not to look at it too long. Seven Hells, the way it shimmered almost made it look like Valyrian Steel!

The sellsword leader grabbed a mug of ale, leaning over it and starting to sniff. His narrowed, icy blue eyes met Ilish's stare, forcing her to look away again. "Botwerys", he growled and one of the mercenaries rose from his chair. Ilish saw that he was only a few years older than herself, with short blonde hair and a stubble beard, with dark brown eyes that were carefully looking at her. "Of course, Ser", he said and walked closer towards Ilish. "Please, mylady, walk with me"

Mostly out of confusion, Ilish followed his wish, as the sellsword lead her away from the table, to one of the slightly calmer corners of the inn. He gave her a good-natured smirk as he looked back towards the mercenaries. "You have no idea what you just did, right?", he asked. Even more confused than before, Ilish shook her head. "I brought what you ordered", she answered. "Seven mugs of beer"

The man gave her a nod, before letting out a sigh. "Perhaps I should introduce myself first", he said and extended his hand. "Alexander Botwerys. Nice to meet you" She reluctantly shook his outstretched hand. "Ilish Granver", she answered. "So, what's his problem?" She looked towards the sellsword leader and Alexander let out a sigh. "You brought him common ale. He probably thinks it smells like rat piss", he answered and in Ilish's eyes, he wasn't too far away from the truth.

"Dear Ilish, this man is not a smallfolk sellsword. This is Ser Rodrik Stone", he continued and Ilish raised an eyebrow. "He got a pretty nice sword for a bastard", she mumbled and Alexander gave her a shocked look, as he grabbed her at the shoulders. "You got lucky that he hasn't heard you. If you value your life, never mention his sword and his last name when you're talking to him. Actually, just avoid talking to him at all", he urged her and a strangely handsome smirk appeared on his face. "Talk to me instead when there's a problem"

As quickly as it came, the smirk disappeared again as he looked back at Ser Rodrik. "And now bring him some wine, the best you have. Do it as fast as possible and you might manage to calm him down", he ordered her. Ilish looked past him and narrowed her eyes as she looked at the sellsword leader. "He looks pretty calm to me", she mumbled and Alexander shook his head. "Trust me, he is boiling with anger and he is not very patient", he warned her.

With these words he gave the grim-looking knight a nod, before turning back to Ilish. "As I said, don't let him wait", he warned her again, before walking back to his table. Ilish let out a sigh. Soldiers, sellswords, bastard knights with Valyrian Steel swords and, worst of it all, Richard Harking's brother. It appeared to her as if the whole city had lost its mind. Still, she started to walk back to the counter, with the intention of fulfilling Alexander's request. Judging from his looks alone, Ser Rodrik wasn't a man she wanted to anger.

Lost in her thoughts, she walked through the inn, as suddenly, she felt a hand, grabbing her sleeve. As she looked up, she immediately noticed that she had almost bumped into Daisy, her best friend and fellow barmaid, who looked similarly lost in thoughts as she put a few empty glasses onto a tray. And she wasn't the one who had grabbed her.

As Ilish slowly turned around, she looked at the young man sitting behind her, giving her the hint of a grin. She let out a sigh. Short, blonde hair, a stubble beard, blue eyes and a scrawny build. She knew him, fleetingly, and reciprocated the smile. "Looks like I prevented a disaster", the

man grinned and Ilish gave him a nod. "Lawsen", she greeted him. "Didn't know you were here today"

The young man shrugged slightly. He was a traveller, who only arrived at Raylansfair two weeks ago, and Ilish knew almost nothing about him, other than the fact that he was pleasant company, compared to most of the other people she knew. While not exactly charming or charismatic, something about Lawsen made Ilish sympathize with him from their first meeting. "Had nowhere else to go. I figured I could spend the evening here, was hoping to find an employer", he explained and Ilish flashed him another smile. "Well, it was a good decision. Audrey would have been furious if I would have smashed these glasses", she answered and turned around, to face her friend. "Isn't that right, Daisy?"

To her surprise, she noticed two things. First, Daisy wasn't smiling. Ilish herself had always been annoyed by cheerfulness, even back home in the North. Because of this, Daisy Vega had annoyed her to no end, after she arrived at Raylansfair two years ago. However, in time her constantly cheerful nature won Ilish over. It was truly a rare and worrying occasion that Daisy wasn't smiling now. Instead, she had an intimidated frown on her pretty face. She was barely looking at Ilish, although she managed to give Lawsen a stressed smile.

"Thanks, Lawsen...", she mumbled shortly, as she looked over Ilish's shoulder. "Something the matter, Daisy?", Ilish asked and Daisy gave her a reluctant nod. "See that guy in the corner?", she asked. Ilish followed her stare and indeed spotted a man, sitting in a corner on a table he strangely had all for himself. She wasn't able to see any facial features, as they were obscured by an oversized hat with a broad brim. Still, even from afar Ilish could tell that something was off with this man. "What is it with him?", Ilish asked.

Daisy pressed her lips together and lowered her head. "He is watching me", she whispered. "At first I thought it was a coincidence, but he is clearly watching me" Ilish raised an eyebrow, slightly shuddering at the thought of a creepy stranger who was watching her best friend. "Are you sure?", she asked. "I mean, I can't even see his eyes"

"I am sure", Daisy said with emphasis. "He has been sitting there for a while now. Earlier, he was watching Rosalie Mettel, but now that she left, he has switched his attention to me" She looked at Ilish. "You're good at dealing with these people. You have to help me!"

Ilish frowned as she heard this request. Sure, it wasn't exactly decent to stare at a barmaid for hours. And if Daisy was right, he had been creeping on Rosalie Mettel earlier. However, she had a lot to do... there was the wine she was supposed to bring to Ser Rodrik. The soldier Malkolm came to mind again, still waiting in the stables, probably seriously pissed off by now. And finally, what if this creepy stranger was dangerous? She was only one woman and not very strong. As if he had read her thoughts, Lawsen cleared his throat. "You want to confront him? If you do, I'd like to help you. Who knows, that guy could be dangerous", he offered.

[Confront the stranger first]

Samantha

The small group made their way through the lively streets of Oldtown. Jaylon had been remarkably silent, still angry that Samantha had forced him to accompany them. Samantha herself could have gladly passed on his company, but she wouldn't leave him alone with Leonard. No matter how great her anger at the knight was, she would make sure that he would leave this city alive. She had seen the look in his eyes as she spoke to him. His own conscience was punishment enough in her eyes.

"So, do you think he's going to be okay?", she asked, looking at Davith. The man gave her a reluctant nod. "It is hard to say. His bone wasn't damaged, from what I was able to tell. The rest can probably heal. He lost a lot of blood, but if his wounds don't get infected, he should survive", he answered and a reassuring smile appeared on his face. "He is a fighter. I'm telling you, he's going to walk around again in no time" Samantha pressed her lips together, as she closed her eyes for a moment. "Hopefully", she mumbled and suppressed a sigh. Leonard wasn't the only one with a troubled conscience.

"How exactly are we going to get into the Citadel?", Jaylon asked, finally breaking his silence, although the tone of his voice was sullen. He looked at Sasha, who shrugged with annoyance. "Through the main gate, I'd say", she growled, glaring at Butterfly's mercenary. Mullendore's mercenary... It was still hard to believe for Samantha. The commander of Oldtown's city watch was the same man who built up a reign of terror in the streets. The man who murdered Lunett, the man who was responsible for the death of her own family. The darkest part of Samantha wanted to grab a knife and use it on Jaylon, just like the Burned Man's girl had used it on the fake Butterfly. Her eyes moved downwards, to the small dagger she was carrying with her, then upwards, to the back of Jaylon's neck. It would be easy, perhaps it would even be satisfying... Samantha forced herself to stop thinking about these things. Killing Jaylon would achieve nothing, would bring her no closer to taking vengeance. Jaylon was responsible for many despicable things, but if he could be believed, he had no hand in the death of Lunett. And she was pretty sure that he had no hand in the death of her family either. No, as long as he gave her no reason, she wouldn't be the one to kill him.

"It was a serious question...", the mercenary mumbled. "You expect to just walk in on the Archmaester of Magic? Come on, you're not telling me you don't have a plan, right?" Sasha looked from him to Samantha, before letting out a sigh. "It's not something I am going to discuss with a swine like you. But yes, I have a plan. There is a friend at the Citadel who owes me. He will get us inside", she snarled. Jaylon slightly frowned at the insult, his head hanging low, a

sight that pleased Samantha. She had no pity with this pathetic figure, shambling through the streets with a wounded leg. In fact, a part of her was still seeking for an excuse to beat him bloody.

In the distance, the towers and high walls of the Citadel were already visible. For Samantha, it was the first building that truly impressed her in this city. Sure, there was the Hightower, but at the end of the day it was little else, just a freakishly high tower, not even particularly pretty to look at. The Citadel on the other hand was a piece of art. At least a dozen towers built it's unique frame, connected with high walls, on top of the walls were houses, even entire streets, reserved entirely for novices, acolytes and maesters of the order. A city on top of the city, far above the smallfolk's sorrows.

"How do you plan on contacting your friend?", Samantha asked and Sasha gave her a light smirk. "That's going to be easy. We're going to find him at the privy", she revealed, gaining surprised looks from Samantha, Davith and Jaylon. "The privy", Samantha repeated toneless, not even bothering with asking the obvious question.

"Remember when I told you that I brought him together with that tailor's daughter?", she asked and Samantha gave her a nod, remembering the tale she had shared with her back at the tavern. "Well, he was caught fucking her in Archmaester Hildyne's bed. He was lucky that Hildyne is one of the more forgiving Archmaesters, but he still had to reforge two of his links and got the privy duty for the next ten years. At least he got to keep his balls and his girl"

She had to pause her tale by Samantha and Davith starting to chuckle almost simultaneously.

"Sounds like a person I just have to meet", Samantha grinned and Sasha gave her a nod.

"Yeah, I'm sure you and Harwyn are going to get along just fine", she answered. "He shares your annoying cheerfulness"

Instead of answering, Samantha flashed a smile towards Sasha, who gave the group the sign to stop. "I'm going in alone. A group of four catches more attention. As soon as I met up with my friend, I'll return", she said and pointed at a narrow alleyway. "You wait there. Try not to attract any suspicion"

With these words, Sasha left the group, giving Samantha a nod as she passed her. Without a further word, Samantha, Davith and Jaylon left the main street, walking into a small alleyway that, in contrast of the busy main street, was completely empty.

A sigh coming from Davith caught Samantha's attention. She saw the look he was throwing at Jaylon, so similar to her own. "Are you okay?", she asked softly and Davith slowly shook his head. "There have been plenty of times where I could have ended Maron Mullendore's life", he revealed. "Back when I was still working for the city guard, I even saved his life once" She saw him clenching his fists. "And now I have to hear that he was responsible for my father's death"

Samantha bit her lower lip and closed her eyes for a moment. "He will pay, sooner or later", she promised and Davith noticed the upset expression on her face. "Who was it in your case?", he asked. Samantha avoided to look into his icy blue eyes. "My whole family", she answered. "My parents, two brothers, two sisters. I have killed the man who did this long ago. Before he died, I made him talk and he revealed that he was one of Butterfly's killers in training"

Davith opened his mouth, but before he was able to say something, Jaylon cut him off. "Boo Hoo, spare us your sob stories, will ya?", he mumbled, causing Samantha to narrow her eyes. "What have you said?", she growled, putting a hand at the hilt of her hatchet. "You want to repeat that?"

To her surprise, Jaylon gave her an angry nod. "Yeah. Spare us your sob stories. We have more important things to do than to get all teary-eyed with each other", he hissed and Samantha took a step closer towards him. Davith's hand on her shoulder stopped her. "Allow me", he said, as he walked closer towards Jaylon, his fists clenched.

"You work for him, you support him!", Davith yelled, as Jaylon tried to back away. He wasn't fast enough and Davith managed to grab him at the collar of his shirt. "And now you have the nerve to mock her? You have anything to say in your defence, you bastard?"

Instead of answering, sudden anger twisted Jaylon's facial expression, as he pushed Davith away from him. "I'm not a bastard", he growled in return. "I have agreed to help you! I am willing to bring you into the Hightower and in return you treat me like shit!"

"For good fucking reason, you obnoxious son of a bitch", Davith hissed, his voice full of hatred as he took another step towards Jaylon, who did not back off this time. "Don't say such a thing about my mother", he answered. For a moment, Samantha thought about intervening, but as if he had read her mind, Davith raised a hand. "I said I got this", he growled and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. Jaylon let out a sigh and raised his hands to the back of his head. "What now?", he asked. "First she spares my life, then you try to kill me? You need me, you dumb ox!" "Davith, he's right. We need him", Samantha pressed through her teeth, despite her anger at Jaylon. Davith shook his head. "No one needs you, Jaylon Gordus. You're nothing but a pathetic asshole", he answered and pointed the sword at Jaylon, who took another step backwards, bumping against the wall of the house behind him. Samantha understood the anger in Davith's voice. She felt the same anger, but she had learned to live with it.

Just as she thought she finally had to intervene, a familiar figure stepped into the alleyway.

"What the hells are you doing?", Sasha snarled, boiling with anger, as she stepped between Davith and Jaylon. "I'm gone for five minutes and you try to kill each other?" First, she gave Jaylon a cold glare. "You... you should be lucky that Samantha spared your life. But instead of being grateful, you continue to be a goddamn pain in the ass. If I ever hear you provoking one of them again, I'm going to rip out your tongue, have I made myself clear, you bloody fucker?"

"Yes, ma'am", Jaylon mumbled and gave her a disgruntled nod, before Sasha glared at Davith, who already lowered his head in shame. "And you... I like you, Davith Lanser. You are brave, tough and usually kind-hearted in a city that is already too crowded with selfish assholes. I expect better from you than getting provoked by this animal!", she exclaimed, before shaking her head. "Actually, fuck you both!" With these words, she looked at Samantha. "This is your damn mission and it was your decision to take both of them with you! Now keep them under control, or I'm out!"

With these words, she turned around, towards the main street, looking over her shoulder again. "You're coming now, or what?", she asked and before she got an answer, started to walk to the Citadel, the rest of the group behind her. "Well, she's pissed for sure...", Jaylon mumbled and Samantha shot him a glare. "Just shut up", she hissed. To her surprise, Jaylon indeed managed to stay silent, as they walked towards the Citadel.

As they came closer, Samantha couldn't help but to feel deeply impressed by the building. She had spent a majority of the past five years in the Free Cities and was used to pompous buildings, but the Citadel was almost a city within the city, crowned by two dozen towers, each of them representing a part of the Citadel. Even from afar, the tower belonging to the Archmaester of Magic was clearly distinguishable from the rest, as it was crowned with Valyrian Steel.

At the front gate, two disgruntled guards waited for them and Samantha gave Jaylon a short look. These men were part of the city guard, although they did not seem to recognize their captain. For a moment, Samantha saw something in Jaylon's eyes that made her regret taking him with them. He could sell them out now, could botch their complete plan...

The moment was gone as fast as it came. Jaylon lowered his head and avoided to look at the guards as they walked past them without any problem. At this part of the day, the Citadel was well-attended, not only by its students, but also by a multitude of visitors, merchants and even mercenaries. Their light weaponry caught no suspicion.

Shortly behind the gate, a young man was obviously expecting them. He was wearing the common brown robe of an acolyte, paired with a chain consisting of five links. His short, brown hair was in a mess and a happy smile was visible on his plain face, as he approached the group. "Sasha!", he called and opened his arms, as if he was trying to hug her.

Sasha quickly took a step backwards, instead pushing Samantha forwards. "Harwyn", she greeted him. "Pleasure as always" The tone in her voice clearly revealed that she wasn't too happy to meet him again, but Harwyn did not seem to mind. "Harwyn, these are Samantha and Davith", she introduced them and shortly looked at Jaylon. "And this one is not important" Jaylon frowned at these words, but stayed silent, as Harwyn shortly glance at him. "As you wish, Sash", he answered and the hint of a smile on Sasha's face vanished immediately. "Don't do

that", she answered. Harwyn gave her a questioning look and Sasha let out a sigh. "Calling me Sash, I mean. I don't like that"

"It's a nickname", Harwyn insisted and Sasha gave him a frustrated nod. "I know it's a nickname. I just don't like it. Can't be too hard to call me by my full name, right? It's just one additional letter, for fucks sake"

Harwyn slightly chuckled and gave her a bright smile. "Looks like you're in a bad mood today, Sash...a", he grinned, before looking at Samantha. "Well, hello there", he greeted her and Samantha gave him a nod. "Pleasure to meet you, Ser", she greeted him back. "Samantha Ducard. I have hired Sasha and we are currently in need of your help"

The acolyte cut her off by nodding hastily. "She already told me that much and that's all I need to know. Friends of Sasha are my friends as well", he grinned. Sasha and Samantha exchanged a quick look. "Oh, we're no friends", Sasha was quick to add, much to Samantha's disappointment. "It's a business relationship. I get paid"

Samantha gave her a quick smirk, before Harwyn continued to speak. "You know, being business partners doesn't cancel out a friendship. I used to know this Pentoshi merchant, who was selling me...", he started to say in a cheerful tone, before Sasha cut him off with an annoyed handwave. "Harwyn", she said. "Just focus on leading the way, please. Bring us to Archmaester Wulvren's chambers"

Both, Samantha and Davith had to chuckle at the highly irritated look on Sasha's face, although Samantha caught Sasha slightly smirking for a second. "I already made the necessary preparations. Nobody will stop you. But I have to ask, what exactly do you want to do at the Mage's place?", Harwyn asked, as he lead the group across the courtyard, towards the Valyrian steel-crowned tower.

"None of your business", Samantha answered, before she noticed the expression on the young man's face. "Sorry", she added. "It's safer if you don't know too much" This seemed to be enough for Harwyn to understand, as he gave her an understanding smile. "I see", he answered. "It's just, the Mage is a bit special. He takes magic way too seriously, even believes in his spells and rituals. He's not easy to get along with"

"You underestimate me", Samantha chuckled. "I can be quite charming if the situation demands it" "I'd like to see that, perhaps once we're done here", Davith answered and this time, it was Sasha who started to chuckle at Samantha's mildly irritated look. "What do you mean?", she asked. "Are you... do you...?" She cut herself off, let out a sigh and shook her head. "Focus on the mission, Davith"

With these words, they entered the tower. Even though it wasn't the highest tower Samantha had ever seen, it was the broadest, the entrance hall being big enough for a small army. And in comparison, it was one of the smaller towers of the Citadel. The hall itself was fantastic. High

marble walls, big windows with green glass, a mosaic depicting a stylized greenseer of the First Men, surrounded by children of the forest. The whole scenery was completed by an eerie silence, as only a small number of acolytes actually walked through the hall.

“Follow me”, Harwyn ordered them and his words were carried through the hall. A few heads turned towards the group as they made their way through, but accompanied by Harwyn, none of the acolytes tried to stop them. Perhaps none of them wanted to. Samantha's hatchets were less visible, but Sasha was openly carrying the large arakh strapped to her back, while Davith was wearing a longsword.

Lead by Harwyn, the group walked up a large, broad staircase, that apparently lead up all the way to the top of the tower, with rooms and hallways branching off of it. Samantha let out a sigh as she thought about climbing the stairs all the way to the top and for the first time since she met him, she even had the hint of pity towards Jaylon, who had to walk the same way with a wounded leg.

Thankfully, they only had to walk half of the way, when Harwyn abruptly stopped, turning to a near hallway. “The Archmaester is not in his chambers at the moment. At this part of the day, he is usually in his study, preparing all kinds of strange experiments”, he explained and walked towards a large, wooden door at the end of the hallway. “One thing is very important. Archmaester Wulvren sees his work as highly important. Do not, under any circumstances, ridicule him or his work, understood?”

Samantha gave him a reassuring nod. “Understood”, she answered, before looking at Sasha and Davith. “You ready?”, she asked. Her companions nodded and Sasha looked at Harwyn. “Thank you for the help”, she said and sounded genuine. A smile appeared on Harwyn's face, as he slowly backed off. “As always, it has been a pleasure. We really need to meet up soon”, he said with a hopeful tone in her voice. Sasha gave him a friendly smile and slowly shook her head. “Don't press your luck”, she answered, as Harwyn turned around and walked down the hallway.

For a moment, Samantha just wanted to enter the room, but she managed to stop herself and knocked at the door instead. For a moment, she heard nothing, before a young, male voice sounded. “The Archmaester asks what you want”

Samantha exchanged a glance with Sasha, before she answered. “We're friends of Leonard Constantine and we are looking for a young acolyte who is name Dairon”, she called. For a moment too long, there was only silence, before the voice sounded again. “Here is n... no one who goes by that name”

Samantha let out a sigh and rolled with her eyes. She tensed up as she felt Davith's hand on her shoulder. “Time to prove how charming you can be, mylady”, he chuckled and she anxiously

shook his hand off, before moving her own towards the doorknob. As she tried to open the door, she noticed that it was locked. Of course...

"Go away", a second, far older, but also way sharper voice sounded. "You are interrupting a highly important ritual. If it's something important, come back later" So, that had to be the Archmaester of Magic... Samantha knocked at the door once more. "Archmaester Wulvren, I presume. Please, we want to talk to Dairon"

For a moment she heard muffled voices, apparently arguing. "Well, but my new assistant does not want to talk to you", the Archmaester called through the door. "So, do us all a favour and leave, instead of wasting your time here"

Yeah, that was not an option... Samantha took a step away from the door and looked at Sasha and Davith. Sasha raised her hands and shrugged. "Don't look at me, I already brought you here. Perhaps you can just explain it to him through the door", she suggested. "And scream it through the whole tower in the process", Jaylon added and earned himself a surprisingly not angry glare from Sasha. "As much as I hate to agree with Jaylon, he got a point here", she admitted. "But if you don't want to leave, this is the only way I see"

"Perhaps not", Davith interjected and he gave Samantha a charming smirk. "I know how to pick a lock and I always have the necessary tools with me" Samantha raised an eyebrow in return, as she looked at the heavy lock. "Where have you learned how to pick a lock?", she asked. Davith chuckled warmly. "You learn a few tricks at the city guard. So, shall I?"

"And anger the Archmaester in the process...", Jaylon mumbled, which caused Davith to give him a livid glare. "You have anything important to add, Jaylon?", he growled and Jaylon gave him a nod. "I point out the flaws in your plans. Anyway, the decision lies with our leader. And if leaving is no option for you, then you better decide for the less horrible plan"

[Wait until someone leaves the room]

Drent

Drent knew, he had to make a decision quickly. He could see how Argella visibly restrained herself from doing something against Torrence. There were little hints of the anger she was suppressing. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, her lips pressed together, her fists clenched and she visibly tensed up as Torrence moved his hand a bit upwards, from her bum to her lower back and waist. Drent even had a bit of pity for the man. No one deserved a Durrandon's fury. "What do you say?", Torrence chuckled, as he looked at Argella. "You, me, a bottle of wine" The Storm Princess let out a sigh. "You really have no idea, do you?", she asked in return, which seemed to confuse Torrence. "I had no idea that there was a servicermaid as stunning as you, honey", he answered with a broad smile, gently pinching her waist.

Drent saw Argella slowly losing control over her facial expressions and for a moment, she revealed the anger inside of her, as a sharp glare pierced through Torrence, while a low growl forced its way out of her throat. And he knew, now he had to act.

"Excuse me", he said as he moved closer. Torrence narrowed his eyes and for the first time during their conversation he moved them away from Argella. "What is it, Golton? Can't you see that I'm talking to a lady?", he asked. "No one's talking to you, so cry me a river!"

Drent let out a sigh. "Can't say I haven't tried it", he answered, before clenching his fist. "You're going to thank me later" And with these words, he threw a quick, but hard punch right into his face.

"That one's for being a bag of dicks", he added, as Torrence stumbled backwards. For a moment, Drent hoped that he would go to the ground, which would make things a lot easier. But in his current state, Torrence barely seemed to be affected by the punch. He let go of Argella, who immediately took a step to the side, looking at him with disgust. Her eyes moved towards Drent and showed a surprising approval. Under other circumstances, he could have lost himself in her eyes, but right now he had to deal with Torrence.

"The hell, Golton?", the man mumbled in a slightly sluggish state as blood slowly started to flow out of his nose. "You... you punched me!" Drent gulped as he took a step forwards, raising his hands to calm the other man down. "Torrence, I... I'm sorry. This is for your own best. Just leave, before things get ugly"

"Ugly...", Torrence mumbled again and Drent saw how he slowly regained his senses. A sharp, angry look got into his dark brown eyes, certainly fuelled even further by the alcohol. "You bastard!", he screamed and tackled at Drent, while surprisingly quickly trying to punch him in the face. Drent was prepared, although he underestimated Torrence's strength. His attempt at defending himself quickly broke down under the force of the first punch and pain flashed through his lower arms as he blocked the attack. Torrence managed to throw him to the ground, jumping on top.

In his rage, Torrence was easily stronger than Drent. He wasn't a very skilled fighter, but Drent knew, Torrence had the strength to become one. Right now, this strength made him a terrible opponent to fight against. Drent wasn't able to fully block the second punch and was hit at the chin, with almost deafening power.

Just as Torrence was raising his hand again, Argella's slim figure grabbed his arm and, to Drent's surprise, managed to pull him up. The Storm Princess looked mildly pleased at Drent's actions and seemed to have calmed down a bit. "That is enough, Torrence, now...", she started to say, but Torrence, in blind rage and in the heat of the moment, lashed out and gave her a slap in the face.

The princess was apparently tougher than Drent thought, as she managed to stay on her feet, despite the slap being hard enough to make her swirl around. In contrast to her porcelain skin, a thin red line of blood was visible on her lip. He was able to see her eyes and in them, he saw a dark blue ocean on a terribly stormy day and the fury of ten thousand years of Storm Kings. Probably out of shock, perhaps even out of a bit of shame, Torrence took a step backwards, as he realized that he had hit her. "Seven Hells... I'm sorry, Gelly. I only wanted to talk, damn it. A simple 'No' would have sufficed! I'm sorry, but that one is your fault. Come on, let me see, perhaps...", he stuttered, as Argella was still focussing her glare on Drent. Then, before he was able to continue, she spun around and gave him an even harder slap in the face, hitting his right cheek. Not without satisfaction, Drent noticed that it sounded just like the crack of a whip. "What the...", Torrence stuttered, but she cut him off by giving him an even harder second slap, perhaps even a punch, right at his chin. "I didn't...", he tried to continue, when a third, fast slap hit his other cheek, finally causing him to stumble backwards. Perhaps out of simple decency, perhaps out of fear or perhaps out of a mixture of both, Torrence didn't even try to defend himself. "Please, no...", he stuttered and a fourth slap silenced him, as he sank to the ground in a sitting position, clearly shocked at what just happened.

"Not... another... word... in my presence", Argella managed to press out with clenched teeth, her voice shivering with anger. Torrence gave her a wordless nod, as he put one of his hands onto his left cheek. The look in his eyes gave away that he finally realized what a mistake he had made.

Heavily breathing, Argella continued to talk, sounding calmer with every word. "My father would have beaten you to death by now", she hissed and looked down at her hands. The sheer force of her slap him must have hurt her as well and Drent saw that the usually pale palms of her hands were as red as Torrence's cheeks. "What people often forget when they look at me is that I am not a delicate little flower. Sure, I'm not as strong as my father, but I'm still his daughter. I think we both agree, this one hurt you a lot more than it hurt me"

Torrence gave her a nod, while she turned around and looked at Drent, her glare tarnished by something that looked like genuine concern. "What is it? Get back on your feet. You don't need me to help you, do you?", she ordered in an authoritative tone and Drent sluggishly started to stand up. Torrence's punch had been heavier than he would like to admit.

"Your... father?", Torrence finally said, which caused Argella's attention to snap back at him.

"Who is your father?" Seven Hells, he still had no idea! Drent knew, Torrence was an avid supporter of Argilac Durrandon. The realization of what he just did could be even worse than the punishment Argella would give him without a doubt.

The Storm Princess let out a sigh, as she clenched her fists again. "Torrence...", she chirped, in the same fake friendliness she had shown towards Ambassador Celtigar. "What have I told you,

about opening your stinking mouth in my presence again?" Followed by these words, she gave him a painful kick, right between the legs, causing Torrence to fall back and to howl and sob in pain.

"What?", Argella asked, her voice full of spite. "Are you crying now? Good! Take it as a lesson, how to treat a lady" Drent used this opportunity to walk next to her and to put a hand onto her shoulder. Halfway before his hand actually reached her, she threw him a glare. "What is it?", she growled.

"My pr... My...", Drent started, still unsure how to address her in this situation. "Torrence learned his lesson. Leave him be, please. He is not a bad man, just drunken and a bit rude. Give him another chance" Argella shook her head. "That remains to be seen", she answered, before turning back towards Torrence.

The man had raised from the ground, even though he held one of his hands onto his crotch. "Fuck you, bitch", he growled and Drent closed his eyes. This man really tried to dig his own grave. "I only tried to talk to you, to have a good time and your bloodhound punches me out of the blue. Then, you... humiliate me, as if you're someone special" He shook his head. "I'm telling you something, Gelly. You're nothing. A common smallfolk wench, and yet you're acting like the Storm King's horribly spoilt brat of a daughter!"

"Do I?", Argella asked calmly, but Drent noticed that the last sentence finally got to her. Her voice was shaking slightly and Drent was only noticing it because he expected it. "Horribly spoilt...", she mumbled, before shaking her head. "Some men just don't know when they should shut up"

Before Torrence could add something that would undoubtedly seal his fate, a new, feminine voice sounded. "Torrence?", a young woman called as she approached them. She was pretty, even compared to Argella, her long hair had the colour of auburn and was tied to a loose bun. She was carrying a quiver with her and had a bow in her left hand as she quickly approached them.

Torrence gave her an annoyed glare. "Edonia...", he growled, as the young woman reached them. She looked from the visibly wounded Torrence, to Drent and finally to Argella. Her brown eyes widened as she, unlike the man next to her, understood who was standing in front of her. "By the gods, no...", she mumbled. "Torrence, you goddamn fool, what have you done?"

The man looked at her in an irritated manner, before shrugging. "I have done nothing, Edonia. A bit of aggressive flirting, nothing too bad, when suddenly, they start to beat me up. For fucking nothing!", he explained, before letting out a sigh. "But, go on, enlighten me, just as you always do"

The woman, Edonia, shook her head and Drent saw the hint of tears in her eyes. "Oh, brother, this time you really fucked up", she mumbled, as she went down on her knees in front of Argella. "Please, my princess. My brother is a foolish child. Please have mercy"

And finally, Drent saw the realization on Torrence's face. "Princess?", he asked, as his eyes widened. "Oh gods... Princess Argella? Oh no, no!" And then, he went onto the ground, right next to his sister. Argella looked at both of them and the cold in her eyes was enough to make Drent shiver. "My princess, please, Torrence learned his lesson", he urged her.

"Yes!", Torrence was quick to add. "Yes, I did. I never meant to hurt you, my princess. How was I supposed to know..." She cut him off by raising a finger, demanding silence, before moving a hand towards her lips. The hint of blood remained on her fingers, as she moved them back again. "Drent", she ordered calmly. "Remind me again, what is the punishment for striking a member of the royal family outside of a duel?"

Drent closed his eyes, as Torrence's desperate pleas got louder. "Loosing a hand, my princess", he answered and Argella gave him a nod. "Indeed. My father follows these laws, and his father before him", she said with a sharp voice, her glare set on Torrence. "Stand up", she ordered him and both, Torrence and Edonia obeyed. "Follow me"

It only took the small group a moment to walk through the camp and to reach an empty tent. It was a kitchen tent, not used at night, but still filled with tables and chairs for a small army. "To the table", Argella ordered and Torrence quickly obeyed.

Torrence gave her a nod, silenced out of sheer fear, not even able to resist her order. His knees were weak and Drent saw a dark spot in his trousers. Edonia was silent too, although she was clearly upset. "This is your fault, little brother", she mumbled. This time, Torrence shot her an angry glare. "My fault?", he growled. "I have been looking for you the whole fucking night! Where have you been, when I needed you?" Finally, his anger died down, replaced by desperate sobs. "Please...", he mumbled. "Please, I don't want to..."

"Give me your sword", Argella ordered calmly, as she looked at Drent. He had been silent so far, even though he felt pity for Torrence. Argella was following the law and was in the right, but at the same time, Torrence wasn't a bad man and he did not deserve to loose a hand over this mess. And the worst part was, Drent felt responsible. He should have tried to calm things down. Perhaps Torrence would have been open for reason.

"Drent?", Argella asked again and he snapped out of his thoughts, putting a hand at the hilt of his sword. "Please, my princess. Think about it again. What would...", he urged her, but stopped. What would her father think? He would probably be proud. What would the people think? Yeah... perhaps that sounded a bit better. "What would your subjects think, my princess?", he asked. Argella closed her eyes and a sad expression flashed over her face. When she opened her eyes, she seemed to be a bit more distant than before. Drent had always doubted House

Durrandon's claim to descend from the gods of wind and sea, but right now, he wasn't so sure anymore. In this moment, Argella Durrandon was a true daughter of the storm, unyielding and full of fury. "Sword", she softly said, but her tone made it clear that Drent shouldn't object again. Reluctantly, he unsheathed his sword, handing it to her, hilt first. And then, he saw something that shocked him. The Storm Princess was amused, the hint of a smirk had formed on her face. "Kneel down and put your hand on the table, Torrence", she ordered and even though he knew what would follow, Torrence obeyed. Fear dictated his actions, of Argilac, not of Argella. Drent exchanged a glance with Edonia, who was shaking her head, an upset look on her face as she watched the Storm Princess preparing to cripple her brother.

"Please, my princess...", Torrence tried to object once more, to no avail. "Close your eyes", Argella ordered. Slowly, she raised her sword. "It's no excuse that you mistook me for a commoner. No man should treat a woman like you did, regardless of her standing. Who knows what you would have done if Drent wouldn't have been with me...", she hissed.

"Nothing, my princess, I swear. I only wanted to talk and perhaps I was a bit too...", Torrence started to say, his eyes still closed, as Argella moved her sword downwards. The moment it hit the table, a loud, cracking noise was heard and Torrence let out a surprised scream.

He slowly opened his eyes, as Edonia let out a sigh. Drent just stood there, looking at the Storm Princess in confusion. The sword was rammed deeply into the table, but it had missed Torrence's hand by several inches. The man looked up to the princess, his mouth open as he raised his right hand, still completely attached to his body. "You pissed yourself", the Storm Princess remarked dryly.

"I... you... why...?", he stuttered and Argella shook her head. The loose bun she was wearing her hair in finally gave up and strands of long, black hair fell down onto her shoulders. "No", she silenced him. "I don't want to hear it. I only want to hear your prayers. You'll stay the night here, praying to each of the Seven, begging them for forgiveness and thinking about what you did wrong. I will sit in front of the tent and listen, so you better pray at the top of your lungs. If you stop before we leave this camp, you will still loose your hand, have I made myself clear?" Instead of answering, Torrence immediately lowered his head, defeated, but perhaps a bit thankful. "May the Father look down upon me...", he started to recite one of the better known prayers to the Seven. Satisfied, Argella turned around. "Drent, Edonia, with me", she ordered. Edonia gave her brother a last look and Drent saw that Torrence responded with an angry glare, not interrupting his prayer.

As soon as they were outside, Argella handed Drent his sword without saying anything. Finally, a smile formed on her mouth, as she noticed the distraught faces of Drent and Edonia. "What?", she asked. "I wonder how long it'll take him to notice that I'm gone"

Drent raised his eyebrows, but it was Edonia who said something first. "You do not intend to listen to him, Princess Argella?", she asked. Argella shook her head and a joyful chuckle found its way out of her throat. "Have you seen his face? Priceless!", she exclaimed. "No, Edonia, I do not intend to listen to him. I also don't intend to punish him any further"

"He hit you", Drent answered, looking at the red spot just below her lip. "Indeed", Argella agreed. A smirk flashed across her face, although it was without any joy. "And if I remember correctly, I hit back. Four times, actually. And I kicked him where it hurts the most. I am a Durrandon of Storm's End and I know my own strength. I guarantee, I hurt him a lot more"

Before she could say another thing, Edonia put her arms around her, in a way that was certainly not befitting for a member of the royal family, pulling her into a close hug. "Thank you", she mumbled. "Torrence can be an ungrateful prick, but he's still my little brother. Whenever he comes off as rude, he just tries to look tough. He is not a bad man. And I... I thought you would..." She cut herself off and separated from the Storm Princess, tears of joy in her eyes. Argella gave her a stern nod. "I know what you thought. Torrence thought the same", she said and put a hand to her wounded lip. "Your brother hits like a little girl. That alone should be punishment enough"

"I am sorry, my princess", Edonia answered. "It looks like I misjudged you" Argella gave her a forgiving nod. "It's alright. You're not the only one who has a wrong opinion on me. They follow my father out of love. I don't want them to follow me out of fear", she answered and flashed Drent a smirk. "At least Drent realized that I never intended to mutilate Torrence, right?" She finally caught his facial expression and her smirk vanished immediately. "Right?", she asked again.

As much as the disappointed look in her eyes upset him, Drent had to shake his head. "I'm afraid you played your role quite well, my princess", he answered, remembering the deceptively real fury in her eyes back when she was talking to Torrence. He had to admit, he hadn't thought she would be capable of mercy.

Argella gave him a smirk that looked more forced than genuine. "I suppose I have", she answered, avoiding to look him in the eyes. "And now excuse me, it has been a long night and I have learned a few interesting things. Also, I really need to get out of these filthy rags. How do my servicemaids manage to stay in them for all day?"

With these words, the princess stormed off towards her tower, leaving Drent and Edonia behind. For a moment, her voice had sound terribly upset and Drent was more than surprised by this. Was she upset to learn what he had thought about her?

"I think I might have hurt her", he mumbled and Edonia gave him a questioning look. "Her?", she asked. "Drent... your name is Drent, right? Listen, she's the Storm Princess. If my brother's slap can't hurt her your words won't do it either" She let out a sigh as she looked back to the kitchen

tent. Torrence's faint praying could still be heard. "Or at the very least she can't afford to be hurt by this"

"Perhaps I should apologize", Drent added and Edonia shook her head. "I don't think that would be a wise idea. We are commoners, Drent. Nothing we do has an impact on them. We don't apologize to royalty, we only try to stay down and not get noticed by them, while they play their game of thrones", she answered. "Trust me, she is a bit upset at best, but not genuinely hurt. But hey, if you want to talk to her, go on, I won't stop you. I need a break after this though. I'll meet up with a few friends at the campfire" A slight smirk appeared on her face, as Drent noticed that Torrence started to pray a bit louder in his tent. "Your welcome to join us, unless you rather want to try to get lucky with your princess, of course"

[Try to talk to Argella] [Join Edonia and her friends at the campfire]

Alys

A few hours before noon, Alys was awoken with a start by the sound of someone knocking at her door. She opened her eyes, for a moment looking around, inspecting the room she was in. A guest room in Harrenhal... At least she was still alive. A smirk formed on her face as she rose from her bed. She was still alive, alive and somewhat free. All in all, it could be worse.

"Who's there?", she asked through the closed door, walking closer towards it, barefooted. The cold ground would have been mildly uncomfortable for others, but for her, it felt just like home.

"A... Adrew Frey", a meek voice was audible from behind the door, if barely. "I am the... the squire of ki... King Harren" Yes, she remembered the thin, pale boy who became a victim of the king's rage yesterday.

"What do you want?", she asked. For a moment, there was only silence. Alys used this opportunity to look around the room for her clothes. She found them and... Alys froze in shock as she looked at the small bundle of clothes. What shocked her was that the dirty clothes she just took off yesterday evening were now laying folded and cleaned on a chair next to her bed. She knew she had locked the door, she had checked it twice! Has someone sneaked into her room, just to clean her clothes?

"Lady Alys?", the voice of Adrew Frey sounded, disrupting her disturbing chain of thoughts, as she started to dress. "Lord... Ser... Anturion, the pirate, he asked for your presence. He is attending a meeting in the Great Hall and re... requested that you accompany him. He does not wish to leave you here alone"

Well, she wouldn't want to stay here alone either way! Not with the king's sons near her. Harrick wasn't too bad, but the others, Harlan and Harndon, they compensated his lack of revolting maliciousness more than enough. And then there was the eldest, Harmund...

She walked towards the door, opening it and revealing the lanky figure of Adrew Frey. The boy gave her a shy smile and lowered his head. "Mylady Alys, you look radiant, if... if I may say so", he greeted her.

"Thank you, Adrew", she answered with a kind smile, before looking down the hall. "Where's Edward?", she asked. "Or Prince Harrick?" The mention of the king's youngest son caused Adrew's smile to vanish. "The prince is already at the Great Hall, together with his br... brothers. Anturion and his mercenary have accompanied them. Lady Alisa is waiting for you down the hallway", he answered shortly, avoiding her questioning stare. "Please follow me"

With these words, he started to walk down the hallway, barely giving Alys the time to close the door to her chamber. As he had promised, Alisa Karstark was waiting for her at the door that lead out of the king's tower. It was obvious that she noticed Alys' clean clothes immediately. She gave her a questioning look, and Alys answered with a slight shrug. Instead of pressing the matter further, Alisa smiled at Adrew and her smile made her look surprisingly approachable in Alys' eyes, despite the facial scars and the harsh look on her face. "Thanks a lot, Adrew", she said. "I'm taking her from here on. Go back to your duties"

Adrew opened his mouth, as if he wanted to say something, but closed it again and instead only smiled shyly. He took a bow in front of Alisa and Alys, before turning around and walking down the hallway. Alisa looked after him, the look in her blue eyes showed the hint of pity. "So, someone was in your chamber at night, to bring you clean clothes", she deduced. "Was it the young prince? Harrick, I mean"

Alys looked at her reproachfully, noticing that she slightly blushed. "That is...", she said, before Alisa started to chuckle. Alys gave her an irritated glare, before she had to join in on the chuckle. "Oh, you...", she grinned. "I don't know who it was. Probably a servant. No one with bad intentions"

Alisa's smirk vanished. "I doubt anyone here has good intentions", she mumbled as she opened the door that lead down the stairs. Alys followed her and had to take big steps to keep up with her. "You still think it was a good idea to run away from home, just to avoid marrying my little cousin?"

Alys let out a sigh. She knew, the topic would come up sooner or later. "Truth be told, I don't know", she admitted. "I never met Dante before" Alisa shook her head. "I know what you want to ask now", she answered. "Sorry to disappoint you. I can't tell you much about him. For what it's worth, he was a sweet kid the last time I saw him. He was also seven years old" A smile flashed across her face as her eyes got a distant look in them. "But even back then, he was different from the others. My brothers, my other cousins, they all wanted to become knights back in their childhood. Dante was different. He was six years old when he learned how to read"

"You miss home", Alys concluded and Alisa gave her a short nod. "Sometimes", she admitted and took a deep breath as they had reached the foot of the stairs, walking out onto the courtyard. In the morning light, Harrenhal had a strange beauty. The gargantuan walls, higher than every building Alys had ever seen in her life, allowed only a few rays of sunlight in the courtyard. Dimly illuminated, the castle managed to hide the evil it housed. The air was refreshingly cool and the rain from last night had managed to wash away most of the smell a castle like this naturally had.

"Why have you left Karhold?", Alys asked and Alisa's facial expression darkened. "Take a lucky guess", she growled. "Why do you think I like you so much, little lady?" Alys gave her a questioning look, before she understood suddenly. "You mean... Who was it for you?"

"Teddyn Forrester", Alisa answered. "Lord Forresters eldest son. A good match for a thirdborn daughter, as my father called it" Alys gulped. Nobody back at home liked to talk about Alisa the Kinslayer and she had never really cared. After all, who would have guessed that she would ever meet this woman? She knew, the topic was difficult to approach, but she still had to do it. Now that she met her, the curiosity was slowly eating her up. "And... your brother?", she asked. Alisa shot her a cold glare. "A mistake", she answered. "That's all I'm going to say about Rohar" Her body language made it clear that their small talk was over. Alys pressed her lips together, regretting that she had brought the topic up. In silence, the duo walked over Harrenhal's courtyard, towards the Great Hall, a building that deserved its name without a doubt. The doors were widely opened and large enough to allow a hundred men at once to enter, yet thick enough to deny it to a thousand, if necessary.

The hall itself was filled with people. Guards, civilians, both Ironborn and Riverlanders. Judging from the banners, several Riverlords were present in this room, as well as several lords of the Iron Islands. Most prominently was the sigil of House Hoare. Last night, Alys had barely paid attention to the marvellous architecture of this building. And even now, she was slightly distracted by the masses of people the hall was able to host.

Despite the crowd, it was easy to spot Edward. He and Carvin stood in a separate booth, intended for the kings personal guests, located a few metres left to the thrones. To the right, a second booth contained the kings sons and their entourage. Harlan, Harndon and Harrick stood there, their clothes as dark as their eyes and in at least two cases, as dark as their hearts. Alys wasn't surprised to see Harlan's hounds standing close to him, including the one with the long beard, who had shown her mercy the other day. And finally, on his throne, sat Harren Hoare. The King of the Isles and the Rivers was wearing his black armour and the long, spiked crown on his head. He was sitting on his throne slightly slouched, looking bored. Yet, there was an inherent cruelty in his eyes as he watched Alisa and Alys walking down the hall, past a thousand men.

It was Edward who spotted them first. A friendly smile formed on his lips, as he approached them. "Lady Alys, Alisa. It's good to see you. And just in time" His smile got wider as he looked at Alys. "Have you slept well, mylady?", he asked. Alys gave him a slight nod. "As good as one can sleep, surrounded by psychopaths", she answered.

"You can get used to it", Edward answered with a chuckle. "I haven't slept a single day in the past fifteen years in which I was not surrounded by psychopaths" Alys gave him a sarcastic smirk, her good mood returning with every passing second. Before she was able to answer, a loud thumping noise silenced her. It was King Harren, who had smashed his gloved fist down to the throne's armrest. Even if the hall was full with people, he only needed one attempt at silencing all of them.

"Bring them in", the king growled with a harsh and hoarse voice. "The accusers and the accused" Alys narrowed her eyes at these words, looking at Edward. "Why are we here today?", she asked. Edward gulped as he looked at the main gates. "Because of what happened yesterday. You got lucky, mylady. While you have been... hunted, Harlan's older brother and his men assaulted a nearby farm that was hiding a group of girls. Surprisingly for Harmund, he left plenty of survivors. The farmer, Woody Lincoln, and one of his assistants are here today" Alys did not answer to this. She was only able to stare at Edward in sheer terror as she realized how narrowly she averted the same fate. She remembered Tomard, the friendly farmhand who had offered her a place to stay the night at Lincoln's farm. If she had accepted... she had to close her eyes, her good mood vanished immediately. On top of that, her gaze fell on Harlan, who looked back at her, with pure, unadulterated hatred.

The large doors to the sides of the great hall, leading deeper into the castle, were opened. Accompanied by half a dozen guards, four men walked towards the throne. The two on the left were clearly farmers. One of them was a scrawny old man, with short, white hair, a wrinkled face and a long beard that reached his chest. He was moving slowly and had to lean on the second farmer, a much younger and more muscular man.

To their right, two men walked and it was out of question who at least one of them was. Harmund Hoare was looking a lot like a younger version of his father, although his hair was fuller and he had a short beard. Next to him walked a slightly younger man, with long brown hair, which he had tied to a short ponytail. He was clean shaven and had unusually tanned skin for an Ironborn. Both men had smug smirks on their face as they watched the clearly distraught farmers.

As soon as they had stopped in front of the throne, Harren raised from it, walking closer.

"Harmund Hoare and Rell Vessels", he growled. "Why am I not surprised by this?" He looked to the farmers. "And you... who of you is this 'Woody'?" Unlike his son, Harren wasn't smiling. His

anger wasn't immediately noticeable, but Alys saw that he had his armoured fists clenched and she heard how dangerously calm his voice was.

"It is him, your grace", the younger man said, looking at the old man, who was now standing next to him by his own power. Harren narrowed his eyes in slight confusion, as he shook his head. "Can't he speak for himself, or what?" The younger farmer gave the king a nod. "Indeed, your grace. My employer has fought for your father. During the war, a head injury cost him his voice. But he has a sharp mind and...", he started to explain, before Harren let out an annoyed sigh. "I'm not interested in his life story. You talk for him", he snarled, shooting a glare at his son. "Why don't you tell us what happened? Speak loudly, I'm sure the Fishlords want to hear every word, with their greedy little ears"

The farmhand gulped and Alys was close enough to notice the tears in his eyes. Woody looked even more distraught, clearly trembling with sadness and anger. "They came without warning", the man started to explain. "A dozen men. They had dogs and weapons" He pointed at Harmund and his companion. "These two lead them. They were the worst. We... seven girls had spent the night with us, to seek shelter from the storm. None of them survived, although some of them had to suffer for hours"

He paused again, until Harren let out an annoyed sigh. "Yeah? Anything else? Hurry up a little bit", the king growled. The farmer continued with a weak, shaky voice. "Prince Harmund claimed three girls for himself and gave one to his companion. The other three were raped by his guards in the open, handed round like... like objects, while the prince and his companion took the barn for their needs", he continued, again pausing for a short moment. "A girl tried to run. They shot her in the legs and ordered the dogs to maul her. And... your grace I have seen what your son has done in that barn and it was worse than everything I have ever seen. He..."

Thankfully, Harren silenced him again, this time by letting out a dark chuckle. Alys realized painfully that this man lacked any kind of empathy. Still, his anger was there and it was real. It was a cold-blooded anger, born out of calculation. "I think I have heard enough", he answered and looked at the accused. "You have anything to say in your defence?"

Harmund's smug grin only got wider, but his companion, the one the king had called Rell Vessels, took a step forwards, which caused the prince to glare at him. "Before you judge us, your grace, you have to know that I have done nothing. I have not killed the girl your son gave to me and I treated her gently", he explained.

Harren's cold, joyless chuckle got a bit louder. "I'm sure she was fucking grateful", he answered. "At least until you gave her back to Harmund. What has he done to her? Slit her throat like a pig, gutted her like the little fish she was?" He looked at Harmund. "Was she still alive when you did your worst?"

The prince smirked at his father, who in turn only glared at him without even a hint of amusement. "You know me, father, don't you?", the prince answered and Harren gave him a nod. "Son...", he said and Alys saw him clenching his fist. "This time, you really fucked up" And before Harmund could react, Harren threw a hard punch with his armoured glove, right into the prince's face, sending him to the ground. "What you do in your private time, I couldn't care less. But you...", the king hissed and Alys understood. Harren wasn't upset because of Harmund's crime, he was upset because of how public he had made it. His anger was little more than a political manoeuvre.

Before the king was able to continue, Harmund jumped up, now equally enraged, blood flowing out of his nose, a knife in his hand. Instead of defending himself, Harren just stood there calmly, as the prince jumped up, holding the knife directly at Harren's throat. The sound of at least a hundred swords being drawn was heard, as the king's guard slowly approached.

"Careful who you hit, father", Harmund spat. "I'm not Harlan or Harndon, who are too stupid to hit back. I am not afraid of you" Harren only shook his head, as good as possible with a knife to his throat. "Boy, you should", he growled. "Want to slit my throat, huh? Well, then DO IT!". His voice got louder. "DO IT AND YOU'LL BE THE KING, UNTIL THEY PUT A FUCKING SPEAR THROUGH YOUR NECK!"

For a moment, Harmund and Harren just looked at each other, united by their hatred at each other. Then, Harmund lowered his knife, taking a step backwards and Harren started to laugh. "As expected, you little bastard. Even Harlan is more a man than you", he mocked him, causing the prince to narrow his eyes again. "Go to your chambers, boy. I'll deal with you later" Harmund gave him a weak nod, before he turned around and stormed out of the hall, each of his steps oozing of hatred, oozing of fear. The king turned his attention at Rell Vessels, who was pale now. Harren put a hand on the young man's shoulder and shook his head. "And you... I would kill you on the spot, Rell, but yesterday, I had a very interesting talk with a revered guest. I'll explain it later, but for now you'll stay alive", he growled and Alys noticed Edward grinning widely.

"What's so funny?", she asked with disgust. Edward shook his head. "I'm not amused, my lady. But if the king just implied what I think he implied, then he just considered to make me a very rich man" He looked at his companions. "All of us"

Before he could explain this topic further, Alys' attention was drawn back to the king, who was now walking back to his throne. "The king's justice was dealt", Harren proclaimed, but was cut off by the young farmhand. "Your grace, with all due respect, but what is with us?", he asked, not noticing the glare the king gave him. "Harmund's men slaughtered two pigs and a cow. They smashed a door, destroyed a table and several weeks worth of grain. Who is going to compensate for our loss?"

“Compensate...”, Harren growled as he walked closer to the farmhand. The man gave him a defiant nod. “Indeed, your grace. Woody is an old man. It took him a lot to come here today. I think it is only fair to...”

He did not manage to continue. With a quick movement, the king grabbed him by the throat and started to throw punches at him. Other men would have screamed in rage while beating a man to death. Harren stayed silent, his dark eyes on the other hand yelled his anger out for everyone who was close enough to see them.

“Stop it!”, Alys screamed weakly and in panic, as Harren started to kick the dying man, with none of the other men even trying to intervene. The king only stopped as the man was little more than a bloody pulp on the floor of his hall. A murderous glare was shot at Woody Lincoln, who had sunken to the ground, crying in helplessness. “Two pigs, a cow, a door, a table and several weeks worth of grain...”, the king mumbled, visibly calmer. “And one farmhand, is that right, Woody?”

As the old farmer did not answer immediately, Harren grabbed him by the shoulders, forcibly pulling him back to his feet. “I said, IS THAT RIGHT, WOODY?”, he yelled at his face and this time, the man gave him a silent nod. The king let go of him and this time, the old man managed to stay on his feet. “I’m a bit surprised that Harmund hasn’t burned down anything. I have to compliment the boy on his manners”, Harren chuckled. “If you get a good deal, you can replace your losses with thirty silver coins, but since I’m in a generous fucking mood, I give you fifty” With these words, he walked back to his throne, a smile on his face as he looked at the bloody mass on his floor that had been a human being just second ago. “Throw the remains of this fishfucker to the dogs. And someone, bring Woody here fifty silver coins and help him home”, he ordered loudly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alys saw that Harlan’s entourage, the bearded man and the other two, were preparing to leave the hall, disgust on their faces. She gulped as she looked back at Harren, who was sitting down on his throne again. “Next case! I’m in a mood for some justice!”, he yelled and Alys let out a disgusted sigh. Could she really take more of this?

To her surprise, she saw that Carvin prepared to leave too. She shot him a questioning look and he pointed at Harlan’s men, who were just leaving the hall. “You see the lanky one? Hjalgar Dipshitson”, he explained. “Got a score to settle with him. A little archery contest” A hint of concern was visible on his face as he put a hand on her shoulder. “You look pale, little lady. A bit too much for you?”, he asked, as she still avoided to look at the bloodied corpse of Woody’s farmhand. “Care to leave with me? You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to”

[Leave with Carvin]

Kersea

Kersea slightly winced as Clayton put a handkerchief to her cheek. The alcohol he has put onto it stung in her cuts and bruises. And as expected, he even had the audacity to give her an apologetic look, at least as much as he was able to do, with his complete lack of genuine remorse. "I'm sorry", he said and she didn't manage to shook her head, with his hand still pressed on her cheek. "I never wanted to hurt you that badly"

"Liar", Kersea said and noticed the hurt expression on his face. The psychopathy of Clayton Teryl wasn't as immediately obvious as Alysanne's or Wolfius'. He managed to hide it, behind charming words, behind calm and thoughtful plans. And for some reason, he only showed his true face around Kersea.

Her eyes moved down to the knife he was wearing at his belt. If she would be fast... If she would be fast, her sister would die. No, killing Clayton was out of question. He followed her gaze and a frown formed on his face. "You must really hate me", he mumbled.

"Can you blame me for it?", Kersea mumbled, without looking at him, as he tended to the wound on her lower lip. "Despite all the trouble you have caused, I'm still sparing your life. I'm continuing to protect your sister", Clayton answered with resentment in his voice. "And yet, you are still so convinced that I am the bad man here"

Kersea let out a sigh, half out of frustration, half out of pain, as the distilled alcohol he used to clean her wounds came into contact the slightly deeper cut on her chin. "This again?", she asked. "I'm not in the mood for another round of your little mind game. We both know how it ends. I insult you, you hit me, I don't hit back, because little Briar is going to pay the price for it" A disgusted look flashed over her face, as she looked at him. "She's ten years old, you *good man*", she spat.

Clayton pressed his lips together, holding the alcohol-soaked handkerchief uncomfortably tight onto her cut, until a pained expression flashed across Kersea's face. "I only follow orders", he hissed and Kersea rolled with her eyes, partially out of annoyance, partially out of relief as he finally pulled the handkerchief away. "Clayton", she chirped, her voice full of hatred. "What part of 'I don't discuss this with a murderous one-eyed bastard' don't you understand?"

The man closed his eyes, raising both of his hands in defeat. "I see, sweet Kersea. Why don't we change the topic?", he asked and Kersea gave him a mildly resigned glare. "Do I have a choice?", she asked. As always, Clayton just ignored her question. Well, that was also an answer, of some sorts.

"You never really told me how your life has been before we met. You never talked about your parents", Clayton spoke and Kersea had to close her eyes for a moment. She knew, he was doing it on purpose. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her in mourning. "I never talk about them, because that's usually not the kind of talk I want to have with their killer",

she snarled. For a moment, Clayton looked genuinely upset. "You're unfair", he answered. "I haven't killed them and you know that. I haven't even ordered their deaths" Kersea gave him a nod of feigned approval. "Good for you. Surely you expect some sort of reward now, do you?", she mumbled.

Clayton shook his head. "Your company is reward enough, my dear. How has your home been? It must have been beautiful, up in the North", he said and for a moment, Kersea saw amusement in his one good eye. "Once I have been to the North too, you know", he added, before she had the chance to answer.

"Whom have you killed there?", she answered and a smirk appeared on Clayton's face. "Please, Kersea. Drop the act. You call me a remorseless monster, but we both know that you have stopped being the innocent little sweetheart from the North years ago", he said gleefully. "Do you still remember how many you have killed on my orders?"

"Nine", Kersea mumbled immediately and Clayton's smirk turned into a full grin. "I'm at forty-eight, but this is not a competition. What matters is, you're not better than me or Alysanne", he chuckled. "If you call us killers, at least acknowledge that you are just like us. Don't put yourself on a pedestal, my dear"

Kersea bit her lower lip as a frown flashed over her face. She knew, he was just saying it to cause her pain. But what truly hurt her was that she knew he wasn't entirely wrong. "And don't you dare blaming me", Clayton continued and she closed her eyes as she couldn't take it anymore to look him in the eye. "I only nurtured your natural talent. What you did to the man who killed your family... that was a work of art"

"A work of art...", Kersea mumbled and opened her eyes again. Clayton's hand touched her hair and gently brushed it over her ear. "To Butterfly, you are just a tool. Whatever Alysanne sees in you is not genuine. To her, you're just an interesting way to pass some time. Raenna is dead", he whispered and gleefully looked at the distraught expression that flashed over her face. "In a certain way, I am the only friend you have left, the only one that cares for you at all in this world" She gulped, as Clayton softly put an arm around her, pulling her into a light hug. She wasn't resisting, she was too busy not to show any weakness in front of him. "So beautiful, so brave", Clayton remarked. "You can be so much more than just Butterfly's tool. Together, we can be so much more"

She closed her eyes, to hide her tears, but mainly to hide her anger, as he leaned in to kiss her. She stopped him by putting a hand on his chest, a gesture that caused his twisted grin to form into a genuine smile, which only got wider as she came closer. "Clayton...", she whispered into his ear, before her voice gained sharpness. "You're sick", she hissed and harshly pushed him away. "I'm nothing like you. And I will never be with you"

For a moment, Kersea and Clayton looked at each other, any trace of softness gone from his face. Then, without saying a word, Clayton gave her a painful slap across the face, reopening the small cuts he had just treated, even further hurting her already bruised cheek, sending her head first to the hard ground.

"Very well then", Clayton growled, his voice sounding colder than ever, as she lay on the ground, beaten once again. "Be a good little tool then, be a good little killer. Other than that, you are nothing. Just a broken and worthless husk" He knelt down next to her, resting his hands on her back as she tried to stand up again, pushing her back to the ground. At this point, she completely failed to hide her tears. She was trembling in helpless anger and in desperate rage. "You hear me? You are worthless", he growled. "The next time you fuck something up, I'm going to cut off your little sisters fingers, every single one of them"

"If you hurt her", Kersea hissed, still facing the ground. "I will kill you. You hear me? I will kill you if you even touch her, you son of a bitch" Clayton's cold chuckle sent shivers down her spine.

"No, you won't. We both know, you just like to talk big, like a beaten old dog that lacks the spine to bite, only able to bark and growl. You will follow my orders, because you know that is the only thing that keeps sweet Briar safe"

Before Kersea could answer, the sound of the warehouse door getting opened caused Clayton to look away from her. "Am I interrupting something?", Alysanne asked cheerfully as she walked in. "Aren't you sweet as sugar, my lovebirds? Come on, I got something important for you"

She walked closer, apparently completely oblivious of the fresh bruises on Kersea's face, judging by the smile on hers. "Get up, Puppy. Bad time to get laid", she joked, looking from her to Clayton. "What have you found out?", Clayton asked and Alysanne grinned proudly.

"Followed him for a while. Currently, he is at the blacksmiths house", she explained. "It should take him a while to get in, but if we want to help them, we have to hurry"

Clayton shook his head, slight amusement in his voice as he answered. "Why should we do that? Let Wolfius have his fun, we deal with him later. What's with the city guard?", he asked.

Kersea noticed that Alysanne's grin vanished and for a moment, the other woman looked genuinely concerned.

"Yeah, that's a problem", she said. "The little rabbit you failed to kill, he informed the city guard.

Over a dozen men are on their way and they should be here in half an hour" She looked at Clayton, who seemed to think about what she just said. "Clayton, we need to get out of here"

He gave her a short nod, before a cruel grin appeared on his face. "And we will, dear Alysanne", he answered, before walking towards the number of barrels that was stored in the warehouse.

"But I don't intend to run with my tail between the legs. They don't know it yet, but this is Butterfly's city. And as long as he is not here, this is my city and I intend to send them a message"

With considerable effort, he opened one of the barrels and the smell of oil filled the air. "Have you ever asked yourself what exactly Ellyrio Terys was trading here in Raylansfair?", Clayton asked with a grin. "All of these barrels are full with lamp oil. Help me spread it over the whole place. I'll take position on the roofs on the other side of the streets. As soon as they are all in here, I'll shoot a burning arrow through the window, setting the whole building ablaze"

"And over a dozen guardsmen with it", Alysanne said, a dreamy expression on her face.

"Imagine how they are going to scream" Her smirk vanished as quick as it came. "But they are going to realize the trap, when they enter an empty warehouse"

Clayton gave her a nod. "That's why you, my dear, will stay behind on the second floor, with a sharpened blade and a well-oiled crossbow. Give them something to fight against. As soon as this building burns, escape through the skylight", he ordered her.

Immediately, Kersea noticed a change in Alysanne's behaviour. The eager, bloodthirsty expression vanished, replaced by almost childlike fear. "You... you're leaving me behind?", she asked, looking down at the bandages that hid her slowly healing burn wounds. "With all the... the fire?" Her eyes widely opened, she started to shiver. "Is that an order?", she asked, her voice pleading him not to do it.

Clayton only gave her a cold nod. "It's not suicide, Alysanne. If anyone can survive this, it's you. Seven Hells, I saw you surviving a lot worse", he tried to reassure her and to Kersea's surprise, she saw tears of fear in Alysanne's green eyes. "Is that an order?", she repeated, giving Kersea a pleading look, nonverbally begging her to intervene.

[Stay out of it]

Lyria

"Rosie...", Lyria growled, as she looked down on her hammer, grabbing it firmly, mostly to suppress the anxiety that caused her to shake. "We're staying right where we are. He can't hurt us in here, we're safe, you hear me?"

Her daughter gave her a short nod, still shaking in fear, as she moved closer. Both of them looked at the dark backroom that now contained an open door. Lyria heard heavy footsteps walking around the house, as Wolfius bashed his knife at every closed window he passed, slowly approaching the backroom.

"Look at me, Rosie", Lyria said to calm her daughter, but especially, to calm herself. "He can't hurt you as long as I'm here to protect you" Rosalie gave her an unconvinced nod, but shivered as Wolfius' howling laughter was heard. "Don't make promises you can't keep, blacksmith Mettel", he shouted. Judging from his voice, he was now near the backdoor.

"He was loud, Rosie. Someone is going to hear it. The city guard has to be here soon", Lyria mumbled again, more to herself than to Rosalie. "No one is going to hear it, blacksmith Mettel",

Wolfius yelled loudly. A cruel chuckle sounded, as he walked past the backdoor, to Lyria's surprise. That was his way in, the only way in! The windows were locked, she knew it.

"We should run...", Rosalie mumbled, but made no attempt at running herself, instead she stood at her position, frozen in fear. Lyria shook her head. "He wants it. Wants to chase us, to hunt us down. It's a trap", she answered.

"Oh, you're right with one thing, blacksmith Mettel", Wolfius chuckled as he came closer. "I would really like to hunt you down. But it looks like you don't want to come outside to play", he growled and his voice now sounded at the window directly to Lyria's right. She took a step away from it, grabbing her hammer firmly. "Then I guess I have to come and get you..."

And then Lyria saw it. The window, the same window that has been locked for sure just minutes ago, was now unlocked, the sliding bolt that firmly kept it shut when he first tried to enter through it was now clearly open. And before she was able to do anything, the window was pushed open and Wolfius Woodbark jumped in.

He looked slightly different from last time Lyria saw him, unhinged, more primal. His left eye was milky white, a fresh cut visible over it. But the look in his remaining eye was even more intense than before, even more unsettling, and a wolfish grin was visible on his face. Without missing a beat, Lyria swung her hammer at him in a high angle, only for him to dodge the attack, as he raised his knife and slightly cut over Lyria's upper arm.

The sudden and unexpected pain was enough to cause Lyria to drop her hammer, but the second strike was even worse. The hilt of his knife hit her face with brutal power, slightly under her left eye, causing her to drop to the ground. "Hello, blacksmith Mettel", Wolfius chuckled, as she struggled to stay conscious.

Rosalie wasn't screaming. She just stood there, frozen in terror as Wolfius stepped over Lyria, walking closer towards her. "And good evening Rosalie", the beast greeted her. "It's such a cold night outside and I have to thank you for letting me in"

She pointed her knife at him, which didn't even seem to concern him. "Stay back!", she screamed in terror. "Mother! Do something, mother!" Lyria let out a grunt, as she tried to get back on her feet. She saw, Wolfius glanced at her shortly, smirking, as he still walked closer towards Rosalie, completely unfazed by her knife.

"I once knew a little girl, just like you", Wolfius growled. "Would you like to hear what I did to her?" He gave Lyria another glare, as she tried to get back to her feet. Wolfius punch had been hard, nearly hard enough to knock her out and at the very least, hard enough to make the whole world around her blurry.

"Would you like to hear how she screamed, how she begged? How long we made her suffer?", the beast continued and an enraptured smile appeared on his face. "Ah, the good old days" For

a moment, it appeared as if Wolfius would pay little attention to Lyria. She used this opportunity to grab her hammer with her other arm, to jump up and to strike at his neck.

To her own surprise, she indeed managed to strike him, even if he tried to dodge the attack. Her hammer heavily hit his shoulder, causing him to howl, as he was sent forwards, struggling to stay on his feet. His small knife was sent flying through the air, landing somewhere behind Rosalie, who still stood still. Her facial expression was nearly as surprised as Wolfius'.

"You...", Wolfius stuttered in surprise, as Lyria attempted to hit him again. "Oh no, you won't", he snarled and before Lyria managed to attack, he jumped forwards, slamming both of his hands against her chin. Once again, she noticed that, for a man as physically unassuming as him, Wolfius had incredible strength. The punch was hard enough to send her to the ground again, but this time, Wolfius jumped on top of her.

"You couldn't just follow simple orders, huh?", Wolfius yelled at her. "You just had to go to the city guard! People like you make me sick!" With these words, he threw two heavy punches at her face. "You live in your small world, do your small tasks and think you are safe, because no one wants to take your small life away from you...", he snarled as he threw another punch, this time at her chin. The force of his attack was enough to stop any of Lyria's attempts to fight back. "Well, big news, blacksmith Mettel. Now I'm a part of your life and I will take away everything you love, just because I can. It's going to be a slow process and it's going to be..."

Just as Lyria was about to give up her struggle to stay conscious, Wolfius' pained howl forcibly caused her to regain consciousness. Rosalie stood behind him, her facial expression full of anger and hatred. She had tried to stab him in the neck, but somehow, Wolfius had managed to partially evade her attack. Instead, her knife was now embedded in the upper part of his right shoulder.

"Stay away from my mother", she growled, pulling the knife out of his flesh in an attempt of attacking him again. Despite his pain, Wolfius was faster than her, a lot faster. Before the knife came even close to him, he had managed to grab her wrist with his left hand, using the right to throw a vicious punch at her face.

"You really are a dumb little whore, aren't you?", Wolfius hissed, as he started to twist her hand. "Should have run while I was busy with your mother" Lyria saw Rosalie's widely opened eyes, the fear, the pain, the helplessness as she realized that the weak punches she threw at Wolfius with her free hand weren't hard enough to make him react in the slightest. And then, without much effort, Wolfius simply snapped Rosalie's right wrist.

The sound of the breaking bone, her daughter crying in agony and Wolfius' amused chuckle immediately caused Lyria's muffled senses to return. She jumped up just as Wolfius yanked the knife out of Rosalie's broken hand. She grabbed her hammer, the same moment Wolfius grabbed Rosalie before she was able to fall to the ground, putting an arm around her neck. His

other arm held the knife and pointed it at her belly, just as Lyria raised her hammer in his direction. "Stop right there, blacksmith Mettel...", Wolfius growled. Everything was silent around them, only the sound of Rosalie's desperate sobs were audible, as she held her twisted wrist with her good hand. "Leave her be!", Lyria barked desperately, although she tried her best to sound authoritative, to hide her fear. "This is between us!"

"Indeed it is", Wolfius agreed. "But I told you, I'm going to take away everything you love" A sick grin formed on his face as he looked down at his wounded shoulder. "This one isn't even going to slow me down. You on the other hand, all battered and bruised. You have no chance at winning. But perhaps it does not have to end today..."

"What do you want?", Lyria yelled at him in desperation, looking at her sobbing daughter. Wolfius' grin got even wider, even sicker as he answered. "I want you to lie awake at night, fearing the moment I could come back to take away the little I leave you with. I want you to see me in every shadow that surrounds you. I want you to suffer, blacksmith Mettel. And most importantly, I want you to follow my orders. Today, all you need to do is to give up. Drop your hammer and maybe, just maybe, I will allow you and your little whore another day in your insignificant life"

Lyria looked down at her hammer and looked at her daughter, wounded, in pain, held hostage by a beast. If Wolfius said the truth, he wouldn't kill them. But would that be better? The life Wolfius described, was that something she wanted for Rosalie? Perhaps she should take her chances. Attack him before he could kill Rosalie. Perhaps they could both make it. Or perhaps she was about to make the biggest mistake in her life.

[Try to attack him]

Richard

"Are you ready for this, Harking?", Jarow asked, as they walked through the nightly streets of Raylansfair. Richard shook his head, which caused the Lord of the Bridges to grin. Behind them, the sound of a dozen marching guardsmen, armed with long spears and wooden shields, was audible. "I don't think anyone can be ready for this", he answered and Jarow's grin turned into a light chuckle. "Well, I am. Haven't fought anyone for too long", he answered.

Instead of answering, Richard looked over his shoulder. A few feet behind him, Philip and Urid walked in silence. Philip seemed to anticipate the coming fight, not unlike Jarow, although it was clear from the worried look in his eyes, that he wasn't anticipating the thought of bloodshed in general. Urid on the other hand was deeply afraid and it was obvious to see. Richard felt pity for his friend, who refused to leave his side out of simple loyalty.

And finally, there was Hackor Nathamer. The commander was walking shortly behind Richard, who had to lead the way to the warehouse. He was wearing his green armour, a long spear in

his hand. His eyes met Richard's and a frown formed on his face. The commander had made it clear that he wasn't happy about having to rely on the help of civilians.

"How is it?", Richard asked, looking at Jarow. "Killing someone, I mean. Looks like I'm about to do it pretty soon" Jarow gave him a big grin. "It's actually pretty easy. You got a sword. You put it in your enemy. You pull it out again. You repeat the process", he explained, before his grin faded slightly. "The most important thing is that you should not think about the lives you are about to take. Things like this break a man"

"Stop!", the commander's loud voice sounded all of a sudden and the guardsmen followed the order like one man. Surprised, Richard stopped as well, turning around to face the commander, who angrily glared at him. No, not at him, but past him. As Richard looked back over his shoulder, he saw a man walking out of an adjacent street. From his uniform, it was clear that he was a member of the city guard. He was young, perhaps a few years younger than Richard himself, with chestnut brown hair and emerald green eyes. It took Richard a moment to realize the similarity this man had to Hackor.

"Arthur...", the commander growled with obvious disapproval. "What are you doing here?" The young man, obviously Hackor's son had a friendly smirk on his lips as he came closer. Behind him, more men walked into Richard's field of view. He counted half a dozen men, more heavily armed than the city guard, lead by a man in full plate armour. The visor of his helmet was up, revealing a man in his late thirties, with unkempt, brown hair and a closely trimmed brown beard. Above his left eye was a quite large scar, but other than that, the man looked handsome. He was clearly a knight, which surprised Richard, considering that Harris was the only knight he knew of that was still in Raylansfair, after Flowers and Constantine left the city, a few weeks ago.

"I bring reinforcements, father", Arthur said and saluted in front of him. The knight took a step closer and respectfully bowed his head in front of Hackor, who sternly looked back. "Ser Darren Tallwood", he introduced himself and Richard realized that the commander widely opened his eyes in surprise. "It has been quite a while, Commander"

A brief smirk flashed over Hackor's face as he gave the knight a nod. "I agree, Darren. Didn't know you returned", he answered, as his smirk vanished as quick as it came. "Only returned yesterday", he answered. "Quite a lot happened while I was gone" This time, the commander let out a joyless chuckle. "You can say so", he answered. "It's good to have you back"

A smirk flashed over the knight's face. "It's good to be back, old friend", he said, before narrowing his eyes. "Your son has told me the basics, but be honest with me. These people, these killers... are they responsible for the deaths of Robert and Eaton?" Hackor shrugged and shook his head. "Truth be told, I don't know. It is possible. If the opportunity arises, perhaps we'll

get one of them alive, but neutralizing the danger they pose is our main goal”, he answered, before looking at his son, who had now joined the formation of city guards.

“What exactly are you doing, boy?”, he growled, which caused Arthur to give him a surprised look. “You called the city guard for this fight”, he answered and Hackor shook his head. “I never called for you, Arthur”, he snarled. “Get out of the formation”

“Father, I am part of the guard”, Arthur protested. “I want to fight at your side!” For a moment, the commander did not answer. He let out a long sigh. “Leave the fighting to the men, boy”, he finally said. “I can't use you here. Go home to your sister. Lock the door until I return. This is an order”

Arthur pressed his lips together and reluctantly stepped out of the formation. “As you wish... commander”, he mumbled, the looks in his eyes somewhere between anger and sadness. Without saying another word, he turned around and stormed off, leaving his father behind.

“Perhaps you have been a bit too hard on the boy, Hackor”, Darren remarked, which caused Hackor to shoot him a cold glare. “I have never commented on the way you raised your children, so do me a favour and don't comment on the way I raise mine”, he barked and Richard noticed the hurt expression that flashed over Darren's face. Hackor on the other hand visibly softened up. “Fuck... I'm sorry, Darren. I didn't mean to...”

“It's okay, Hackor. We should just concentrate on the task at hand”, the knight remarked, before a murderous glare appeared in his eyes as he looked at Richard. “You're Harking, right?”, he asked and Richard gave him a nod. This caused Darren to take a step towards him. “You have seen them. Tell me, was one of them a tall man, ripped with muscles, missing an eye?”, he demanded to know.

“I don't know”, Richard truthfully answered. “It was dark and I have only seen one of them. A young and pretty woman, dark hair and dark eyes” The knight let out a sigh. “If I meet this one-eyed bastard over there, he is going to be a dead man”, he promised. “I have reason to believe that he killed my family, to lure me away from the city, to give him an opportunity to kill Lord Robert as well” He pressed his lips together and let out a frustrated groan. “Lead the way, Harking. I have to know if this bastard is there. And if he is, I'm going to chase him through all the Seven Hells”

He didn't need to repeat his order as Richard was happy to oblige. He had seen the look in Ser Darren's eyes. This was a man who had lost everything, a man ready to take vengeance. And Richard hoped that he would find what he was looking for. They walked the rest of the way in silence and Richard wasn't even thinking about talking in the brooding knight's presence.

They arrived at the warehouse only a few minutes later. Without saying a word, Hackor gave orders. Two men walked into an adjacent warehouse, with the intentions to climb its roof, to

attack the killer's warehouse from above. Hackor himself took three of his men, Philip and Urid with him through an alleyway with the intention to attack the warehouse from its back-entrance. And finally, Richard, Jarow, Darren and his men and half a dozen men from the city guard, who walked towards the warehouses front entrance. Jarow let out a chuckle of anticipation, as he drew his sword. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get them", he growled.

"Not yet!", Darren hissed. "We wait for Commander Nathamer's sign" Jarow gave him a nod.

"Fine. But I'll go in first", he answered, pointing his sword at the door. For a moment, they waited, listening to the sound of Hackor Nathamer's men, who prepared to enter through the backdoor. Then, the sound of splintering wood was audible, followed by the sound of steel being drawn, followed by a thumping noise and a pained scream.

"That's our signal!", Jarow growled, jumping up and running towards the door. "Up an at them, men! Leave no surviv...!" His charge inside of the building was abruptly stopped as soon as he tore the door open. For a moment he just stood there, before stumbling backwards, revealing the crossbow bolt that was deeply embedded into his shoulder.

"Fuck!", Darren shouted, as the Lord of the Bridges went down, heavily wounded, but alive. The knight and his men, accompanied by Richard, took position next to the door, hopefully out of side from the archer. "Get him out of here", he yelled at one of his men, who quickly proceeded to grab Jarow by the shoulders, dragging him away from the entrance.

"There's a lot more where that came from, bastards!", a feminine voice called from the inside.

Richard, standing to the right of the door, looked at Darren, standing to its left, waiting for orders. The knight hesitated for a moment, before he heard a second, pained scream from the inside, narrowing his eyes. "Now", he hissed and proceeded to run into the building. One of his men followed, only to quickly fall to the ground, a crossbow bolt in his eye. After him came Richard, who was only able to jump over the dead man's body, as he quickly looked around.

In the darkness, it was hard to make out any details. He knew, there was a second floor, with a gallery that would allow a crossbowman to shoot down. He also knew that he desperately had to find some cover, the moment a second bolt hit the man who stormed into the warehouse just after him. While he had no idea where the crossbowman sat, he decided to jump into the same direction Darren was heading, landing slightly behind the knight, who had taken cover behind a large crate.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw movement in the dark. Hackor Nathamer and his men, or at least what was left of them. The dim light shining in through the back entrance revealed that one of Hackor's men wouldn't stand up again. While the commander was crouching, Urid was lying next to him, a bolt in his upper leg, obviously in a lot of pain, but thankfully alive. To his concern, Richard wasn't able to see Philip.

“Have you seen the enemy?”, Richard asked under heavy breathing as he crawled closer towards the knight. “Indeed”, Darren answered. “For a moment, when I stormed inside, I was able to see her” Richard saw that the knight was shivering. “I think... Harking, I think I know this woman. She is part of the group I have been chasing through the Stormlands, part of the group that murdered my family!”

The knight and the commander exchanged a glance as Hackor slowly shook his head. “Stay in position”, he signalled with his mouth, but Richard knew, Darren wouldn't listen. He had seen the look in his eyes. The knight was livid with anger. And indeed, before Richard could do anything to stop him, Darren jumped up and started to rush towards the staircase that lead up to the second floor. To Richard's surprise, not bolt was fired at him.

“Darren!”, Hackor called, jumping up from his cover, just as Richard did the same. And in this moment, he realized what the archer was waiting for. Instead of firing at the knight, she fired at the commander, heavily hitting him in the chest.

Seeing their commander going to the ground finally caused a number of his men to let down their guard. At least four of them jumped up, rushing after Ser Darren. Richard hesitated for a moment, before he noticed that his hand was wet with... He smelled on it, cringing as he recognized the smell of lamp oil. The whole place was full with lamp oil! He knew there had to be at least four killers, counting Wolfius, but they were apparently only fighting against one woman in a good position. And as Richard looked around, to the bleeding Urid, to the cowering guardsmen, to Commander Hackor, heavily wounded, but alive, he finally realized that they had walked into a trap.

Other men in Richard's position would have fled by now. Perhaps some would have grabbed Urid, to help him escape as well. But Richard would not leave Darren and the men who rushed upstairs behind. “Commander, this is a trap!”, he yelled, hoping that Hackor would hear him in his condition, before he rushed after the knight.

Despite his wound, he almost managed to catch up to the heavily armed knight and his soldiers, who were a lot slower than him in their chainmail. Darren had just reached the top of the stairs as Richard reached its foot, when he staggered backwards, against a wall, revealing the bolt that had pierced his pauldron.

The sight of the downed knight was enough to send the guardsmen into a rage as they stormed up the stairs. Richard followed closely after them, but stopped as he reached the top. The four men had loosely surrounded a young woman, who casually held an unloaded crossbow in her hands. Her entire left arm and waist were heavily bandaged, but Richard was still able to see red burn scars underneath them. She was wearing her black hair in a bun, her green eyes looking at the men in anticipation. A twisted grin formed on her face. “How many more of you do I get to kill?”, she chuckled with a joy that was completely out of place, considering her situation.

She dropped the crossbow to the ground and quickly moved her hands to her belt, where two long knives were hanging.

The moment she drew the knives out of their sheaths, the guardsmen attacked, all at once. The woman effortlessly dodged the first two attacks, parrying the third and answering the fourth with a counterattack. Her knife hit the guardsman in the throat, sending him to the ground, as he was gurgling and holding the hole in his throat.

Without missing a beat, the woman evaded the attack of one of the guardsmen, doing a quick step slightly to the side, before she rammed one of her knives between the ribs of her attacker. Even before she was able to pull the knife out, the other two guardsmen attacked her simultaneously. She parried one of the attacks and before the second was able to reach her, she caused the guardsman to stagger as she delivered a heavy kick against his knee.

Finally pulling her second knife out of the ribs of the man she had just killed, she grabbed the man she just caused to stagger and violently plunged the knife into the back of his neck. An amused, but undeniably cruel smirk was visible on her face as she effortlessly parried the attacks of the final guardsman with a single knife, casually playing with her second knife in the process. Richard knew, she was just toying with him, although she quickly got bored.

"Disappointing...", she mumbled and finally dodged an attack, ramming both of her knives into the man's crotch. As the guardsman started to howl in agony, she jumped on top of him and started to repeatedly stab him in the belly and chest.

Richard used this momentary lack of attention to attack her, in the hopes to land a hit on her before she even realized his presence. He raised his sword, suppressing the urge to let out a battlecry, as he swung his sword at her, even before she looked up... only to have her parrying the blade with one of her own without even looking at him. "Hello, little rabbit", she mumbled, finally looking up from the mutilated corpse of the guardsman, almost child-like joy visible in her eyes. "You should have stayed dead" And in this moment, Richard recognized her as the woman who had shot him in the leg.

She jumped up and attacked him, even though the low speed of her attack clearly showed Richard that she was just toying with him. Still, he parried her strike and even tried to attack her back, knowing that just giving up wasn't an option. Of course, she effortlessly parried his strike and managed to trap his sword between her knives. "I'm going to finish what Kersea should have done", the woman hissed, and her voice was oozing with cruelty. "She's cute as a puppy, but just as soft" A sinister smirk appeared on her face as she looked down. "By the way, rabbit... how's your leg?" And with these words, she delivered a heavy kick against Richard's wounded leg, sending him to the ground as he was shivering in agony. Richard let out a sigh, knowing that he had lost.

He closed his eyes, just as the sound of breaking glass was audible. The woman let out a surprised noise as a loud noise caused Richard to reopen his eyes. From downstairs, flames were visible, quickly spreading across the walls upstairs. And the woman's facial expression changed. "No...", she hissed. "No! This bastard gave me no time to get out... He promised... He promised!", she stuttered and Richard saw fear in her eyes. "No, no no...", she hissed as she looked up towards the skylight. She looked back at Richard, this time not with cruelty, but with desperation. "You're not walking out of this, rabbit", she hissed as she raised the knife she was wearing in her left hand.

And then, everything happened very fast. Something hit her arm, a small, burning log, obviously doused in lamp oil, immediately causing the bandages she had wrapped around it to catch fire. She let out a shrieking noise, full of agony as she stumbled backwards, first to the wall, then to the ground, desperately trying to extinguish the flames that swiftly started to burn her left arm. As Richard raised his head, he saw Philip walking closer, holding a second, burning log as if he was shooing a wild animal away.

Even if she quickly managed to extinguish the flames, the woman was still clearly in agony and limited to use her right arm as she started to climb the wall, towards the skylight. Richard felt Philip grabbing him at his shoulders and forcibly pulling him back to his feet. "Are you alright? Can you stand?", he asked and despite his pain, Richard managed to give him a nod. "We need to get out of here", he growled, just as the skylight was opened.

Two guardsmen looked down, pointing their crossbows at the woman. For a moment, Richard saw fear in her eyes and a pain that made him feel pity, even for her. Then she closed her eyes and a smile appeared on her face. "Do it...", she mumbled, waiting for her death. To Richard's surprise, the guardsmen did not fire. Instead, the first of them started to gurgle as his body grew limp and he fell through the skylight, past the woman and into the flames below. The second one only raised his head, as someone pushed a dagger into his eye. A figure appeared on the skylight and Richard recognized the young woman who was part of this group of killers, the one that had nearly killed him. She extended her hand down, grabbing the other woman's arm.

"Come on, get up!", she yelled. "I'm not leaving you behind!"

Richard let out a cry of anger as he saw the woman getting pulled through the skylight, but before he could even try to rush after her, Philip grabbed his shoulder. "No! No, we need to get out of here!", he yelled. Richard took a deep breath and gave him a nod. Of course, Philip was right. "The commander...", he mumbled. "Is alive. His men carried him out of here when everything started to burn"; Philip answered. "But these bastards left Urid behind! He's still down there, surrounded by flames and he can't move! We need to get him out of here!"

With these words, Philip and Richard started to rush towards the stairs. Richard's gaze fell on the unconscious, but still breathing body of Ser Darren Tallwood and he stopped. Philip gave

him an alarmed stare. "What is it, Richard? Come on!", he yelled, but Richard shook his head. "Ser Darren...", he mumbled. "I can't leave him behind..." To his surprise, Philip gave him a nod. "I'll save one of them, you save the other", his friend explained. "Which one do you want?"

[Save Darren and trust Philip with saving Urid]

Jaron

"So, you are sure this is the right course of action?", Jaron asked, looking at Bakr. The large man gave him a decisive nod, followed by a big grin. "You can trust me. Don't run after some woman and it'll make her run after you instead", he explained.

"As the legions of women chasing you can confirm", Martin interjected with sarcasm. "Come on, Jaron. You don't plan on following that oaf's advice, do you?" Bakr narrowed his eyes, which made his brows come even closer, to the point where they touched. "Hey, no need to get rude, boy", he growled. "Jaron follows a clever advice. First, he does the work. Then he does the pleasure, isn't that right?"

Jaron gave him a slightly overwhelmed nod. "Sure...", he answered. "I guess" This caused Martin to shake his head. "Well, it's your decision. But keep in mind, he's not the one who is about to charm a whore out of her pants", he answered with a grin and slightly rubbed Keira's belly. She gave him a mildly annoyed look. "Yeah...", she said slowly in a voice that showed that she wasn't too thrilled about his words. "How charming..."

Martin gave her a confused look. "What? Have I said something wrong?", he asked, before shooting Jaron a playful glare. "Looks like I have to pay after all. I hope you're happy now" Jaron smirked at these words, before raising from his chair. "I'm going to follow Bakr's advice. I should probably check up with Blackwell now. Make some plans", he answered and Bakr slightly clapped his hands. "That's the spirit, Jaron!", he complimented him. "Go for it!"

Martin and Keira on the other hand just exchanged a glance, before the whore let out a sigh. "We can only warn you. If you want to talk to Harpy, you better do it as long as the feelings from your big moment back at the warehouse are still fresh", she advised him. "Though I guess I can understand that there are other important things to talk about tonight"

Jaron gave her a nod and a smile, thankful for her advice and understanding. "I better leave now. I don't know what Blackwell plans, but it sounded pretty important", he said. "From what I have seen about him back at the warehouse, we shouldn't take this Tom lightly"

He noticed Martin's grin to vanish as soon as he mentioned the name. The mercenary slightly shook his head. "That bastard...", he mumbled. "Make sure that Blackwell's plan involves putting the Tom through a lot of pain before he dies" For a moment, he looked more distant, a bit sullen, before his cheerfulness returns. "I'd love to help you, but, you know, I got more important things to do...", he smirked and looked at Keira. The whore chuckled and glanced at him. "We'll see

about that", she remarked. Bakr said nothing, instead he only gave Jaron a sly wink, before the knight moved away from the table, towards the door.

As soon as he entered the hallway, Jaron noticed how warm it has been in the room. The cold air in the hallways was refreshing. He had the bad feeling that following Bakr's advice in how to deal with a woman wasn't exactly the wisest approach. After all, this man was a Ghiscari! Then again, he remembered, so was Harpy. Still, Jaron couldn't get rid of the feeling that he had made a terrible mistake. For a moment, he stood in the hallway, almost willing to turn around. Then, a door at the other end of the hallway was opened and a small, thin figure walked out. "Ah, Ser Jaron! Over here!", the figure called with a young voice and in the darkness, it took Jaron a moment to identify Himani. An expression, half smile, half eye-rolling flashed over his face as he walked closer to the urchin. "Himani", he greeted him and put his good hand on his purse. "How are you? Haven't seen you around after the warehouse was finished"

The boy gave him a big grin. "After I have lead Martin and his men to your aid, I have moved back to the mansion. I've never been keen on watching people killing people", he said and his grin vanished. "Although I know it had to be done. M'lady Harpy is not in the best mood, I've heard"

Jaron gave him a grim nod. "You can say so", he agreed. "I'm going to talk to her later. First I have a meeting with Ayden Blackwell" Swiftly, Himani pointed at the door he just left. "I know", he answered. "He's in there, with the Burned Man and with Bakr's creepy friend"

This caused Jaron to raise an eyebrow. "Abbas and the Burned Man are in there? Blackwell hasn't mentioned them", he interjected and Himani slightly shrugged. "You haven't expected that the Burned Man would allow Blackwell to make these plans all on himself, do you?", he answered, before looking past him. "I'm going to join the fun in there", he added and pointed at the room Jaron just left. "I have heard there's bottles of wine, just standing around"

He giggled and moved past Jaron, who took a step closer towards the room Himani just left, before throwing a look over his shoulder, back at the urchin. "Uh, Himani... how old are you exactly?", he asked. Himani stopped and gave him a confused look. "Almost eleven. Why are you asking?"

Jaron gulped, before slightly shrugging. "Just... aren't you a bit too young to drink wine?", he asked, which caused the boy to chuckle. "Oh, Ser Jaron", he said with a grin. "I'm not going to drink it, I'm going to take it and sell it later" He hastily looked to the door, before giving Jaron a nod. "And now I gotta go, as long as there's still money to be made" With these words, he darted towards the room Jaron just left, leaving the knight alone in the hallway.

As he entered the room Himani had just left, he immediately noticed how hot it was in there. A bright fire was burning in the fireplace and the windows were shut tight. Bent forward over a big wooden table stood Ayden Blackwell, looking at a number of papers. Next to him stood Abbas

al-Yunkari. The Ghiscari wore a red tunic that made him look almost like an honest businessman, but the shrewd and wicked look in his eyes fooled no one. And finally, the Burned Man, sitting in an armchair near the fire, slightly shivering despite the heat.

"Jaron", he greeted him. "I am glad you decided to join us. I take it you haven't talked to Harpy then?" Jaron was unsure if the sober tone he spoke in was good or bad, just as he was unsure if the Burned Man in general approved or disapproved of his interest in Harpy. He feared the latter, while hoping for the former, as he saluted in front of the Burned Man. "No, Ser", he answered. "I figured, making a plan could be more important"

"More important than expressing your feelings?", the Burned Man asked and raised an eyebrow. Before Jaron could even think of an answer, a deep, baritone chuckle sounded. "Don't bother with answering, Jaron. I understand your reasons", the crimelord reassured him. "I was just surprised that a man as young as you values responsibilities that highly" He let out a sigh.

"Although, if you came here with the intention of working out a plan together with Ayden here, I have to disappoint you. You only came to learn your position in this plan"

"You have already made a plan...", Jaron deduced quickly and the crimelord gave him a nod. Blackwell slightly shrugged as he looked up. "Don't look at me, knight. Should have seen that one coming, right?"

"You should", Abbas agreed coldly. "Me and the Burned Man have talked about this already. Now that Butterfly is dead, we are up against his highest ranking underlings. The one that gathered most of Butterfly's former men around him is a masked freak who is name 'The Tom'" His dark eyes met Jaron's and the fire that reflected in them couldn't hide the coldness in his glare. "You have already met him, haven't you?"

Jaron gave him a reluctant nod. "I am not easily intimidated, but that man was scary. I dislike men who feel the need to hide their face behind a mask. And the things I have heard about him", he said and slightly shuddered. "And then there was this thing that accompanied him, this giant"

"The Moggy", Abbas explained. "Not the brains in the Tom's gang, obviously. They call themselves 'Alley Cats' and claim to be a mercenary group of some sorts, but they are just common street thugs, if you ask me. As for the Moggy, you can be relieved that he is not an actual giant, just a freak of nature. Doesn't make him any less dangerous, of course"

"Their whole group is dangerous", Blackwell remarked. "Killers, rapists, sadists. I'm not even sure if the Tom is the worst of them" He looked down at the papers again. "Killing him has to be our main goal from now on"

"I agree", the Burned Man mumbled. "What makes them so dangerous is that I know nothing about what kind of people they are behind the mask" He paused a moment, apparently looking for words, while he started to tap onto the armrest of his chair. "I know about Jaylon Gordus"

hard childhood. I know about the events that lead Samuel Harrington down on the dark path he is walking right now. But I know nothing about the Tom as a person, not even how he looks", he explained. "I'm not surprised that he took control over most of Butterfly's remaining men"

"So, how are we going to kill him? He was present at the warehouse. He won't fall for the same trick", Jaron remarked and the Burned Man shot him a glare. "And neither will I allow such a trick again", the crimelord hissed and let out a sigh. "Sadly, the next step in our plan is risky too", he explained. "Once again, I'm relying on Harpy and on you, though the circumstances will be different than last time. My sources report that the Tom plans something big, something we need to stop"

"What exactly do you mean?", Jaron asked, looking into the crimelords dark eyes. "What is he planning?" The Burned Man leaned forwards, as good as possible and waited for a moment, before he started to speak. "There is one force in this world that allows scum like him to thrive", he explained. "Chaos. Uncontrollable change. The complete absence of control and order. Everything I abhor and stand against. As long as we have nothing, we need chaos to become someone in this world, we need to change some part of the existing order. As soon as we have achieved something though, the order starts to work in our favour and we do everything to make it prevail"

"So, the Tom wants to create chaos in this city to become more powerful?", Jaron asked. "I thought the death of Butterfly already created a lot of chaos" The Burned Man gave him a nod and the hint of a pleased smile. "Indeed, Jaron", he answered. "And he used this chaos to take control over most of Butterfly's former men. However, if he ever wants to become more than a masked freak with an army of thugs, he needs to shake this city to its core"

He paused again and his eyes looked distant for a moment. "Now that Butterfly died, it was up to me and a few other powerful men in this city to contain the chaos as good as possible, to prevent someone like the Tom to gain power in place of Butterfly. These men are Lord Hightower, the High Septon and Commander Mullendore"

He gave Blackwell a nod and the sellsword moved one of the papers closer to Jaron. He immediately realized that it was the plan of a large building. "House Vyrwel's estate here in Oldtown", Blackwell explained. "Like many lords, the Lord Leo Vyrwel owns property in the city. Unlike many others, he actively maintains it" The hint of a smirk flashed over Abbas' face.

"Perhaps because he finds his real seat, Darkdell, as boring as everyone else", the Ghiscari remarked with a stilted chuckle. Jaron gave the Burned Man a confused look. "And what has Lord Vyrwel's estate to do with the Tom?", he asked

The Burned Man cleared his throat, which caused him to cough for a moment, before he regained his composure. "Once a year, Lord Vyrwel hosts a masquerade ball, one of the most exquisite events in the city. The next of these is in nine days. Interestingly enough, it is also one

of the few events where Lord Hightower, Commander Mullendore and the High Septon will all be present", he explained and for a moment, he grinned. "Strangely, it is one of the events I never get invited to"

"He wants to kill all of them...", Jaron realized. "At the very least Hightower and the High Septon", the Burned Man corrected him. "Mullendore is a born follower. Harmless without someone above him. But the other two are in great danger, because I have learned that several of the Tom's men are going to be present during this event, most likely even the Tom himself" "So, why don't we warn Lord Hightower?", Jaron asked and Abbas let out a irritating chuckle. "He will surely believe us", he remarked in a mocking tone. "Though, even if he truly does, he would most likely just cancel the whole event, depriving us of our best chance to kill the Tom" The Burned Man nodded in agreement. "Abbas brings up a good point. As much as I hate it, we have to take a risk here. I don't know yet how the Tom was able to get invitations for him and his men, but I know it is fiendishly difficult", he added. "I was, however, able to get one invitation, and a real one on top, for Lady Gwynna Caron, secondborn daughter of Lord Caron. Her grandmother was a zo Loraq, old Meereenese nobility"

"You're planning to send Harpy in her stead!", Jaron exclaimed. "But... that's far too dangerous" The Burned Man gave him a sad nod. "Your concern is touching, Jaron. If there is any other way, I would take it. But we need to kill the Tom before he becomes a problem and the masquerade ball is our only chance", he answered calmly. "I will send Abbas and Bakr on the road to Nightsong, to ensure that Lady Gwynna won't arrive in time. She and Harpy look similar, as I've been told. Half Ghiscari, half Andal. Besides, with the little trick she pulled on me and Butterfly, she proved that she is more capable than I have thought. In this matter, I trust only her"

Jaron clenched his fist and pressed his lips together, slightly upset about this plan. Sure, Harpy's plan worked out the last time, but barely, as his broken arm proved. The thought of sending her into danger once more was discomforting. "And what will be my role during this?", he asked, already knowing the answer.

"You'll be her loyal guardian", the Burned Man answered as expected. "Together with Martin, Ayden and another one of my men, Jarek. On top of that, Lord Vyrwel hired one of Martin's... *acquaintances*, a high-end whore named Keira, to entertain certain guests. You can count on her help as well. And then there's..." He looked at Ayden Blackwell, who started to speak. "Taria Templeton", the sellsword said and a smile flashed over his stern face. "She and me, we're... close. She's a singer, the most beautiful voice in the Reach. The new Lord Vyrwel took a liking to her and hired her for this event. She will be able to smuggle weapons into the estate"

"The three potential targets are highly important for the balance in this city. If one of them dies, the Tom will get opportunities to become more powerful than Butterfly ever was", the Burned

Man explained. "But that's not the only consequence. Should only one of them die, or two, the remaining targets can also use the situation to their favour. While the Tom is my main concern at the moment, I don't want to strengthen Mullendore or Hightower's position any more either"

Jaron gave him a nod. "I think I understand the problem, Ser", he spoke and a smile flashed over his face. "Looks like I need to buy a mask" The Burned Man slowly shook his head. "I'm taking care of this", he remarked with a low voice. Jaron noticed that his shivering got stronger, even though the air in the room was warmer than ever. "Jaron, could you... I need to talk to Harpy about what happened today. Could you get her for me, please?", he stuttered

"I can do that", Jaron answered, though the Burned Man only gave him a frown in return. "I suppose you can. I know you want to talk to her, but keep it short. What I have to say to her is important", he answered. A small handwave with his charred hand made it clear to Jaron that the talk was over. He lowered his head as a gesture of respect, before walking out of the room and into the cold hallway.

As Jaron walked down the hallway, he noticed that he was covered in sweat, not only because of the heat. On the one hand, he had a lot of respect for the Burned Man. If he said the truth about his plans for Oldtown, he deserved support, in Jaron's eyes. That, on the other hand, was the main problem. How much of his affability was genuine? Could he be trusted? At the very least, Jaron was sure that the Burned Man was better than Butterfly and the Tom, which of course did not mean much.

He entered the celebration room and the air that previously seemed so hot now appeared to be pleasantly warm. The room itself was a lot emptier than before. With a grin, Jaron saw Himani trying to hide a large bottle of Arbor White under his shirt. Bakr sat alone near the fire, staring at his half-empty glass, while Martin and Keira had apparently already left the room. The huge Ghiscari spotted Jaron and a wide, friendly and pissed drunken smile appeared on his face.

"Ser Bastard!", he greeted him. "Come over here"

Even though Jaron couldn't wait to talk to Harpy, he did the man a favour and walked towards him. "Bakr", he greeted him with a short nod. "Where are Martin and Keira?" Bakr let out a short, thundering laugh and nearly spilled his drink as he grinned at Jaron. "Can't you think so, boy?", he asked. "Anyway, I want to congratulate you. Just a few minutes ago, your girl ordered her third bottle of wine. That means, by now she's pissed drunken and ready to do anything you suggest"

"She's not my girl", Jaron answered. "Not yet, at least. And the Burned Man would like to talk to her and I guess he prefers her sober" Bakr's grin vanished. "Shit...", he mumbled. "No, no, no, that's not good. Go, talk to her, now! Make her sober again, somehow!" He gave Jaron a pleading stare. "And if someone asks, I never gave you any advice", he said, before a smirk appeared on his face. "But if you win tonight, don't forget to thank me"

"I don't think anyone is going to win if the Burned Man gets angry", Jaron answered, before turning to the door that lead outside, to the balcony. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment and tried to calm down a bit, before stepping outside.

It was a cold night. The balcony gave a wonderful view over the city and the pale moonlight successfully hid all the depravity Oldtown had. A comfortable looking bench was standing there, next to it a small table. Three bottles of wine stood on it, one empty, the other two opened, but still containing a lot of wine. As Jaron walked closer to the bench, he saw Harpy lying on it, her eyes closed, curled up in a ball, sleeping.

"Fuck...", he mumbled, as he looked down on her. In the pale moonlight, she looked soft and misleadingly innocent. But no matter how beautiful she looked right now, it didn't change the fact that she was sleeping. "Fuck!", he called again, a bit louder this time, as he faced the city below him. "Fucking Bakr, with his fucking advice..."

He stopped and shivered from the cold, realizing that Harpy was shivering as well. While he was wearing warm and thick clothes, she only had a thin, white dress that barely covered her arms. Perhaps bringing her inside would be a good idea, even if he had to wake her up for this. Jaron knew, with his broken arm, he could never carry her inside, even if she only had half of his weight at best. Alternatively, he could just let her sleep and simply bring her a blanket. After today's events and in her current condition, she had earned a little bit of rest, in his eyes.

[Try to wake her up to get her inside] [Bring her a blanket and let her sleep]

Ellena

With narrowed eyes, Ellena gave Samuel a short nod. "Give up your weapons and you can enter. Take what you came for and then leave", she said, through clenched teeth. Samuel let out a sigh, before moving his hand to his belt. Slowly, he removed his sword, carelessly throwing it to the ground, followed by two daggers. Finally, he carefully pulled out a simple dagger. Instead of pulling it to the ground, he handed it to Ellena, who reluctantly grabbed it. "Careful with that one, girl", Samuel growled. "It's almost as important to me as the ring"

She gave him a short nod. "Understood", she answered and quickly looked at him, realizing that he had indeed given up all of his weapons. She turned around and saw Jarek and his men looking at her in shock. "With me", she ordered Harrington. "Stay behind me at all times. Try something funny and these men will kill you"

As Ellena and Samuel walked up to the ship, Jarek slightly shook his head. "Have you lost your mind, little lady?", he asked. "This man is dangerous!" "I'm unarmed", Harrington remarked dryly. "How dangerous can I be?" With these words, he stared at Jarek, until the other man had to take a step backwards. "Little lady, this is too dangerous. Allow me to kill him. You'd do the world a favour!"

"No!", Ellena decided firmly. "I don't want any more bloodshed. I don't think he's our enemy at the moment" Jarek sighed and shook his head again. "He is working for Butterfly", he growled, which in turn caused Samuel to chuckle without joy. "Butterfly is dead. I'm working for no one" "Still, you killed a lot of good people, Fang!", Jarek spat and almost drew his sword, before Ellena was able to put a hand onto his forearm. "I am sure you did the same", Samuel answered coldly. "It was war, I am a sellsword. I did what I was paid to do"

"Like hitting little girls?", Jarek spat. Samuel slightly shook his head. "Since when do the Burned Man's henchmen work for little girls?", he asked. Before Jarek could answer, Ellena silenced him with a handwave. "Careful", she hissed. "Or this little girl orders your death"

Samuel only sighed. "Lead the way", he growled. "I can't wait to be off this ship" "And I can't wait to have you gone", Jarek answered, before he accompanied Ellena and Samuel down the ship. The hostile glares of the sailors did not only hit Samuel, but Ellena realized that they looked at her as well. She brought him here, the man who killed one of their friends, she even protected him from getting his deserved punishment. Still, he came to her not as an enemy and it would have been unwise to provoke him. Enough blood had been shed because of him.

In uncomfortable silence, they walked past the sailors, down the stairs that lead to the captain's quarters. Ellena pressed her lips together as she realized that Talea and her father were still down there. That would not be good...

"Ellena, what are you doing here?", she heard the familiar voice of the older girl, before she heard Talea audibly gasping for air. "My god, Ellena! Get away from him!" With these words Talea stormed through the hallway and grabbed Ellena at the shoulders, pushing herself between her and Harrington, who stood there calmly. "Talea, he isn't...", Ellena tried to say, before Harrington cut her off. "Easy, girl", he growled. "I'm here to reclaim something I lost. I want no bloodshed"

"Tell that to my father!", Talea yelled at his face. "He nearly lost his hand because of you! Moreo is dead, you fucking bastard!" Samuel's facial expression did not give any emotion away as he closed his eyes for a moment. "Are you done?", he asked. "Then step aside, I..."

He was cut off by Talea violently hitting him in the face, even if he barely stumbled backwards. Her hit was followed by a second punch. "You bastard have the nerves to come back!", she yelled and took a step backwards, trembling with anger. Samuel opened his eyes again, glaring at her not less angry. "I have not hit you back, girl", he growled. "That alone should proof my intentions. But hit me again and I will paint this ship red with your blood"

Ellena heard the sound of Jarek drawing his sword and knew, she had to intervene. "You're going to die before you...", Jarek shouted, before she cut him off. "Stop it!", she yelled. "Enough blood has been shed. Talea, he is not here to cause more trouble and we don't need another enemy. Just let him pass, let him get what he came for and we will never see him again" She

and Talea looked at each other for a moment, before the older girl sighed. "You are right with one thing", she said. "Enough blood has been shed" With these words she moved aside, allowing Samuel to pass. As he walked past her, she only looked at the ground.

"My father is sleeping", she said, which caused Samuel to stop in front of the captain's quarters. "I'll stay silent", Samuel promised, without looking at her. He entered the room, leaving Ellena, Talea and Jarek behind. Only moments later, he stepped out again, holding a small object in his left hand, a surprisingly peaceful smile on his face as he looked at it. "It's good to have it back", he said to no one in particular, before looking at Ellena. "Thank you"

His thankfulness caught Ellena off guard and she only managed to give him a nod. "You're welcome", she said as he walked up to them. Before he passed them, he looked at Talea. "Burn in hell", she hissed with hatred in her voice before he could say anything. Tears were flowing down her face as she moved past Ellena. Jarek looked from her, to Ellena, to Harrington, before he let out a sigh and followed her.

Without saying a word, Harrington continued to walk back to the stairs, Ellena closely behind him, still holding his dagger. Still, not even once did she contemplate to kill him. His calm behaviour was off-putting, as she had to remember his cold-blooded actions the last time she met him. Her cheek still slightly hurt where he had hit her.

They walked past the sailors and past the Burned Man's guards, down the ship, where Harrington's weapons still lay on the ground. Without saying a word, he grabbed the sword and girded it again, followed by his daggers. Finally, Ellena handed him the knife he had given her without a word. He gave her a short nod. "Well then. I stay true to my word. You will never see me again", he promised, before turning around.

"Wait!", Ellena asked, as the curiosity finally got better of her. Harrington stopped, looking over his shoulder. "What is it?", he asked. "This ring...", Ellena started, trying to find the right words. "Why is it so important to you?"

For a moment, it did not appear as if Samuel wanted to answer. Then, he let out a sigh. "It belonged to my younger brother", he revealed. "The only thing I have left of him. He was murdered" Immediately, Harrington noticed the expression on her face, and oddly enough, his stern face softened up slightly. "You've lost family too, is that right, girl?"

She gave him a nod. "My father", she revealed. "Murdered by... by someone. I don't even know who did it" In a certain way, she realized, this was the worst part. She knew nothing about the man who took her father, about his motivations for doing so and it was unlikely she would ever find out, here in Westeros. Harrington took a step closer again and knelt down, so that he was able to look her in the eyes. "I am sorry to hear that", he said and he sounded honest. "I hope you find the bastard who did it"

Even if she didn't want to, she gave Samuel the hint of a cold smirk. "I hope the same for you", she answered. This time, Samuel's distanced look returned. "Unlike you, I already know who killed my brother. The same man who murdered my sister and my parents", he said and let out a sigh. "It was my older brother, Ryder"

He noticed Ellena's open mouth and shook his head. "Before you ask, no, I don't know why he did it. I intend to ask him, before I kill him", he answered. "I only know that he's somewhere here in Oldtown" A sudden realization hit Ellena as she looked at him in surprise. "You hope that Butterfly can help you in finding him", she exclaimed and Samuel gave her a short nod. "I wasn't working for Butterfly because I want his gold or because I am a sadist. I worked for him because he can give me what no one else can", he answered and his gaze hardened. "Vengeance, on the bastard I once called my brother"

He closed his eyes and for a moment, Ellena saw a hint of sadness in his eyes. "Listen, girl...", he mumbled. "I know, we have our differences. I can't undo the past, but I am sorry. For hitting you and the other girl, for hurting the captain and for killing your friend" To Ellena's surprise, he extended his hand. "You won't see me again after today, I promise. But I could sleep easier, knowing that, once I have avenged my family, there might still be a chance for me, that I'm not too far gone", he mumbled softly. "I'd like to ask for your forgiveness, Ellena"

[Shake his hand and forgive him]

Lucas

Even before the knife reached his forearm, Lucas started to shiver. He could see the cold, emotionless look in the Sphynx' eyes, as the torturer moved the knife downwards, slightly touching the flesh of Lucas' arm. "Where is Dairon?", he asked calmly and waited for a moment. As soon as he noticed that Lucas had no intention to answer, he started to cut. He did not cut deep and it wasn't unbearable pain. But the long cuts that already covered both of his arms burned with pain as the knife moved past them and the culminated pain caused Lucas to scream.

"Where is Dairon?", the Sphynx asked again, still in a flat, sober tone. He raised the knife, allowing Lucas time to breathe for a moment. The knight looked up, from his wounded arms, right into the torturers merciless eyes. "Fuck you!", he spat and the Sphynx let out a sigh. "Your bravery is admirable, Lucas", he complimented him. "Sadly, it is futile. It's not going to be any easier for you"

He and Lucas looked at each other, before the masked man let out a sigh. "I assume I have to take more drastic measures", he said and let out a stilted chuckle. He and Conor exchanged a quick glance and the boy started to grin widely. "You're not going to like that, bastard", he said as he gleefully looked at Lucas. "Once the Sphynx starts, you'll tell him everything"

"Which is exactly the problem, Conor", the Sphynx explained as he pointed at the bag he was carrying. "Hand me the skinner" Conor's grin got even wider as he reached into his bag and pulled a honed, thin blade out of it. Not moving his gaze away from Lucas, who realized that he just got pale in fear, the boy slightly chuckled. "Lupin would have loved this", he remarked and the Sphynx narrowed his eyes.

"Lupin would have killed him by now. Your brother never had my patience. That makes me a better Sphynx than him", the torturer said decisively, before his attention returned to Lucas. "You see, I am a very patient man. It does not matter to me how long it takes until you break. Sadly Maron wants results as quickly as possible"

He let out a sigh, as one of his gloved fingers moved across the small knife. "Flaying has never been my favourite method of getting information. Of course, it is a fun way to pass the time, a great opportunity to bond with the captive, but the pain makes any kind of information we get unreliable", he explained and looked at Lucas. "Have you ever been flayed, Ser Lucas? It is the worst pain you will ever feel in your life. Afterwards, you're going to beg me to get another opportunity at telling me what I want to know. Sadly, you'd probably even tell me a lie to make it stop" For a moment, he looked at the knife, before he shrugged. "But, ah well, desperate times call for desperate measures" His dark eyes moved back to Lucas, who winced as his gaze focussed on the blade. "Last chance, Ser Lucas, or else, I'm going to do something you'll regret. Where. Is. Dairon!"

Lucas glared at him, trying his best not to show his fear, even though he knew that he was shivering. "Go to hell...", he mumbled weakly and the Sphynx chuckled coldly. In complete silence, he moved the knife downwards, cutting through the soft flesh of Lucas' left pinky finger. Lucas was a fighter, a knight. He was used to physical pain. But nothing ever came close to the pain that was now flashing not only through his hand, but through his whole body. A pained scream forced its way out of his throat, which caused Conor to chuckle in amusement.

"Where is Dairon?", the Sphynx asked again and in his pain, Lucas was only able to shake his head. The Sphynx let out a sigh, undoubtedly out of relief, as he looked back at Conor. "Hand me the tweezers", he ordered him. "You know, Ser Lucas, less civilized men would use their bare hands for what I'm going to do now. But I think we can both agree, you deserve certain standards" His assistant handed him a small pair of tweezers and the Sphynx' eyes lit up with joy. "You should thank me, friend" With these words he rammed the tweezers into the freshly cut wound, causing Lucas to groan in pain, before he slowly started to pull the skin away. Lucas raised his head and howled in sheer agony.

"He left the city!", he screamed. "He already left the city! Stop! Please!" The Sphynx stopped. Painfully slow, he pulled the tweezers out of Lucas' thumping finger and narrowed his eyes. "Dairon left the city. He stays away from the main streets and tries to return to Raylansfair by

foot", Lucas continued, hoping that his desperate lie would work. "Finally", the Sphynx remarked indifferently. "We're making progress" The torturer looked at Conor, before both shrugged in unison. "But since this is a work of art, we shall continue for a little longer, shall we?", he said joyfully and rammed the tweezers back into the maimed flesh, again, forcing Lucas to scream. "Sphynx!", a new voice sounded and immediately, the torturer turned around, stepping aside in the process and revealing the open door of Lucas' cell. Maron Mullendore slowly stepped inside, glaring at Lucas. "You're flaying him?", he asked and the Sphynx gave him a nod. "Indeed, Maron. I know, it's not your kind of torture, but before you complain, I just got a result", he answered triumphantly. "Dairon is no longer in this city. Ser Lucas just told me that the boy tries to walk back to Raylansfair. Without a horse, he can't even be at Honeyholt yet"

Mullendore gave him a impatient nod, before he glared at Lucas, who started to shiver, out of pain and out of fear. He noticed that he started to break out in cold sweat. "I'd like to compliment you on your work, Sphynx", the false knight growled. "But sadly, this little cunt lied to you. The men at the gates consist entirely of my most trusted men. They know how the boy looks. No one gets out of Oldtown without me allowing it"

He and Lucas looked at each other and before Lucas could do anything, Mullendore had crossed distance between them with two large steps, grabbing his hair and brutally slamming his head onto the table. For a moment, Lucas nearly blacked out, as a dizzy feeling started to overcome him. Then, Mullendore pulled him back up, nearly knocking the chair he was sitting on over.

Despite his pain and fear, Lucas forced himself to glare at Mullendore. "Come on, coward...", he spat weakly. "Unchain me and we can end this like men" He knew, this had no chance of success. Still, in this moment, all he could see was Lunett's mutilated body and blind fury overcame him. Unexpectedly, Mullendore started to chuckle. "Like men, huh?", he growled, before reaching into his pocket, pulling out a small key. To Lucas' surprise he indeed opened the shackles that kept Lucas tied to the table. But before he was able to use his newly gained freedom to his advantage, Mullendore slammed a massive fist straight into his face, sending Lucas to the ground.

"I'M FUCKING DONE WITH YOU!", the knight screamed at the top of his lungs, as he reached down and grabbed Lucas by the throat. "You think the Sphynx is bad? Boy, the Sphynx wanted to keep you alive. I, on the other hand, don't give a shit about what happens to you. If necessary, I cut you into pieces until not even your bastard mother will recognize you!"

With these words, he pushed Lucas onto the table and started to throw punches at him. Despite his age, the false knight had immense strength and Lucas was unsure if he would have been able to take him on in a fair fight, much less in this situation. "You're telling me what I want to

know!", Mullendore shouted as Lucas slowly started to drift into unconsciousness, barely noticing the hard punches that hit his face, his upper body and his shoulders.

"Maron...", the Sphynx hissed and Lucas was sure that Mullendore wasn't even listening.

"Maron, you're killing him... BUTTERFLY!" This time, Mullendore looked up and for a moment, he stopped beating Lucas. "What is it, freak?", he growled, as Conor looked at Lucas, a strangely horrified expression on his face. "He can't take much more, Maron", the Sphynx answered. "If you kill him..."

"Then he's dead", Mullendore answered. "What's one more dead body at this point?" He let out a sigh as he looked at Lucas, who was barely able to recognize his surroundings with his swollen eyes. "Hey, hey... are you loosing consciousness, boy?", he asked and looked at Conor. "Hand me a hatchet", he ordered and the boy cringed, before hastily following the order.

"Maron, what are you planning? He's barely conscious!", the Sphynx asked, but Mullendore wasn't even listening. Lucas felt how he grabbed his left hand and immediately, his dulled senses returned. Pain flashed through his face as he realized how severely Mullendore had beaten him up. As he moved his tongue around, he realized that more than one of his teeth was missing. But, the hatchet...

"No, wait!", he screamed, but it was too late. Mullendore forced his left arm onto the table, moving the hatchet downwards and cleanly severing Lucas' index, middle and annular fingers at the second phalange. As Lucas bellowed with agony, Mullendore started to laugh roaringly. "I don't know what you mean, Sphynx!", he shouted. "He looks pretty damn conscious to me! Isn't it amazing how a little bit of pain can stimulate a body?"

He lifted Lucas into the air, before brutally slamming him onto the table, putting his forearm onto his throat, so that Lucas was barely able to breath. "That was for lying to me", Mullendore growled, as Lucas looked at the stumps where his fingers used to be just second ago. Helpless agony forced tears into his eyes, which in turn caused Mullendore to laugh mockingly. "Look who's crying now. Your girl cried the same when I hacked off her feet. Like a fucking baby" His hand moved to his belt and as he raised it again, Lucas realized that he had pulled out a small knife. "No, wait!", he managed to shout, as the knife swiftly came closer, towards his eye.

"Wait?", Mullendore asked, as he stopped the knife directly above Lucas right eye. The tip of the blade already painfully touched it and Lucas was afraid even to close his eyes at the moment.

"Boy, you know what I want. I don't care how much I have to hack off or cut out to get my answers. And if you die from your wounds, nobody will cry for you. Your only chance to live another day is to give me the answer I want" His face moved closer, his green eyes warped with hatred, warped with anger. "And don't you dare lying to me. I would notice. Tell me, where is Dairon...", he growled, before his voice got louder. "If you don't tell me, this knife is going to be the last thing you're ever going to see in your life!"

[Try to lie to him]

Lucas

"We told him to run!", Lucas yelled and Mullendore raised the knife a tiny bit, now pointing at the knight's temple. "He is hiding in an empty warehouse at the docks" Mullendore let out a sigh.

"Good answer, boy", he complimented him. "Sadly, yet another lie" He pressed the knife into the skin of Lucas' temple and the knight started to scream. "And lies deserve punishment, don't you agree?", Mullendore chuckled as he slowly started to cut from the temple, down to Lucas' right eye.

The moment the knife touched the eye, Lucas nearly lost consciousness. He clenched his teeth together, almost biting through his tongue in the process, but ultimately, he screamed, violently shaking in an attempt of pushing the knife away from him. Mullendore still cut down, from the now ruined eye, over Lucas' cheek, down to his chin. "Should have just told me the truth, boy", Mullendore growled. "Because you can't take much more, I see it. You're about to break. By the way, you don't need this, do you?"

With these words, he grabbed Lucas right ear and despite the horrible agony he was in, Lucas tried to throw weak punches with both hands at Mullendore's arm, to no avail. In a swift, but nonetheless painful movement, the knife cleanly severed the ear. Lucas barely noticed it, a thumping, dizzying pain slowly forced him to drift into unconsciousness.

"Want to sleep, huh?", Mullendore growled, while looking at the freshly severed ear. "Well, NOT YET!" The knife moved to Lucas' left temple and immediately, panic forced him to stay awake.

"No...", he mumbled weakly as the knife started to cut, slowly, but steadily approaching his eye.

"No... NO! NO!", Lucas screamed. "CITADEL!" He closed his remaining eye, out of fear and out of shame as tears formed in it. "Citadel. Archmaester of Magic", he mumbled weakly as his vision started to fade. "Please, no more..."

He barely noticed Mullendore chuckling with sudden joy. "Now, that's something new. Wasn't that hard, was it?", he growled as he raised the knife again, sparing Lucas' remaining eye. "We'll check that. I hope for you that you told me the truth this time, or else I'm going to take your other eye as well, cripple" There was something else, but Lucas wasn't able to notice it anymore. For him, there was only darkness.

Samantha

"We're going to wait", Samantha decided and slightly rolled with her eyes. "I don't want to shout our presence through the whole Citadel and I definitely don't want to anger someone who

studied magic by picking his lock” A sheepish grin formed on her face as she took a step away from the door. “That's not how I want to die”

“Then how do you?”, Jaylon asked. “Want to die, I mean” Samantha raised an eyebrow, but it was Sasha who answered. “Was that a threat?”, she snarled and Jaylon quickly shook his head.

“A question”, he answered. “An attempt to start a conversation” Sasha sighed. “A shitty attempt”, she mumbled and this time, Jaylon slightly grinned. “Well, we have a conversation, haven't we?” As Sasha let out an annoyed groan, Samantha couldn't help but chuckle.

“At a high age, in my bed, surrounded by people I love”, she answered and her group gave her a surprised look. “What is it? That's how I'd like to die”, she continued, before she looked at Davith. “And you?”

The man shrugged, before leaning against the wall. “Sounds fine for me”, he answered. “But I always liked to die fighting. Don't think old age would suit me” He smirked at her in a rather irritating way. “Never thought you'd be the old-age kind of person”, he grinned and Samantha answered with a warm smile. “I'm full of surprises”, she said and chuckled slightly.

“I just hope I die without pain”, Jaylon mumbled and Sasha shot him a short glare. “Do you see anyone who cares?”, she asked. Now it was up to Jaylon to look at her in an irritated manner. “Could you please tell me what your fucking problem is, Sasha?”, he asked. “I can understand if Samantha is angry at me, or Davith. But you?”

“I told you before, people like you disgust me”, Sasha spat. “You only followed orders? Just ordinary sellsword work? That's what you tell yourself, so that you can sleep at night, don't you? What your boss did to the people in this city...” She cut herself off and Samantha noticed that Sasha was almost at a loss of words. “And yet you try to talk to us as if nothing ever happened. How much lower can you sink? Just shut up for once... you... self-righteous prick!”

Jaylon did not answer. He took a step back, leaning against the wall, his head hung low. “You think I wanted things to come that far? When I grew up I always wanted to be a knight. Or even better, a lord”, he said and for a moment, a childish joy appeared in his eyes, followed by the hint of a smile. “With a real castle and servants. Where no one has to suffer from hunger, not even the peasants”

Samantha pressed her lips together and took a step closer towards Jaylon. “So... at which point did the boy with big dreams like that turn into an asshole henchman of a monster? Your mother never loved you?”, she asked, still not feeling too much compassion for him.

Jaylon shot her a shot glare, before his gaze softened a bit. “My mother loved me a lot”, he answered. “It was my father. A Stark soldier, crippled in a fight against the Ironborn. Afterwards, he was a wreck, an abusive drunkard and a fucking wreck. Only good thing he ever did to me was teaching me how to fight” He paused for a moment and Samantha saw the hint of tears forming in his sullen eyes. “He gave me a choice, either to join the Stark army, or to take the

black, so I ran away”, he mumbled. “When I left him, it was the best day of my life and the worst, for I had to leave my mother behind as well” He looked up and glared at Samantha. “What was I supposed to do? Starving to death? No, I used the only skill I was ever taught and worked my ass off to survive, to achieve something in this world. If that makes me the... the asshole henchman of a monster in your eyes, then that's a price I'm willing to pay”

He and Samantha looked at each other for a moment, before Davith interrupted them. “Boo Hoo”, he said and Samantha remembered what Jaylon said earlier. “Spare us your sob stories, will ya” Jaylon narrowed his eyes, before letting out a sigh. “I guess I deserved that one”, he mumbled, while Samantha looked at Davith. “That was not very empathetic”, she said, even if she fully agreed with him. Davith shrugged. “It was the truth”, he answered. “And you deserve a lot more, Jaylon Gordus!” His voice gained sharpness, but to his credit, he still leant against the wall, instead of storming at the other man. “So, that's your excuse, huh? Your daddy hit you? Mine's fucking dead and so is Sam's whole family! You see any of us being insufferable bastards?”

“Guys...”, Sasha said slowly, but Samantha didn't even pay attention to her. All that mattered now was to prevent a fight to break out. Jaylon nearly jumped at Davith as he came a step closer, clearly livid with anger. “Never. Call me. A bastard!”, he shouted. “I know what Butterfly did and I don't deny that I helped him. But how can I prove that I want to change if you don't even give me a chance?”

“Guys...”, Sasha repeated, this time with more urgency in her words. Davith and Jaylon didn't bother with looking at her. “Not now, Sasha”, Davith growled. “I don't give you a chance, Jaylon, because some people don't deserve chances. There's no excuse for working with Butterfly”

“Oh, because what you do is so much better, Davith Lanser!”, Jaylon yelled. “These guardsmen you killed? Yes, they worked for Butterfly, but they also had families! How does that make you any better than me? I don't ask for forgiveness, I only want a chance to prove myself!”

“GUYS!”, Sasha yelled at the top of her lungs and this time, everyone looked at her. “We got a problem”, she mumbled and pointed down the hallway. “Oh fuck...”, Jaylon mumbled. As Samantha followed her stare, she saw a man, standing at the other end of the hallway. At least, she was pretty sure that he was a man, judging from his muscular physique. He was tall, wearing fine dark clothes and a black, hooded tunic. A slightly curved sword was dangling at his belt and a number of throwing knives was strapped to his chest. Most importantly, his face was hidden behind a white and golden mask that showed a stylized cat. “Please, don't interrupt your delightful discussion just because of me”, the man said with a deep, melodic voice, before he took a mocking bow. “Greetings. I am the Tom”

Samantha saw how Davith and Sasha immediately drew their weapons, while Jaylon let out a curse. “Fuck”, he mumbled. “Fucking fuck. We're dead. We're all dead!” While he said this, he

tried to hide behind Samantha, a pathetic attempt, especially as he was at least half a head taller. The Tom only had to look past her, before he let out a slight whistle. "Now that's a surprise. Hello, Jaylon", he hissed. "Haven't expected you to be here"

Jaylon gulped audibly, before he started to speak with a shaking voice. "Listen, Tom... I had no choice in this. I was forced to come here, against my will!", he stuttered and Davith let out a disgusted noise. "Damn coward...", he mumbled, even though Samantha noticed that he seemed slightly afraid of this man as well. The Tom shook his head. "I don't think I can believe you, Jaylon. Perhaps Butterfly and the Sphynx will find out the truth"

He took another step closer and this time, Sasha pointed her arakh at him, while Davith held a small throwing knife between his fingers, glaring at the masked man. "Stay back!", Samantha shouted. "It's three against one. If you start a fight, we will kill you" She wanted to say more, in the attempt to intimidate him, but was cut off by his mocking laugh. "My dear, why exactly do you think I came alone?" He let out a short whistle, as if he was calling a dog and Jaylon let out a fearful wail.

Instead of a dog, the tallest man Samantha had ever seen walked around the corner. It had to be a giant, or at the very least, a half-giant, with arms as thick as tree trunks and shoulders at least twice, perhaps even thrice as broad as hers. In one of his massive hands he was wearing a blade, almost as tall as Samantha herself was. He was clad in white clothes and as with the Tom, she wasn't able to see his face, as it was hidden behind a white cat mask, stained with dark red blood. The only thing she saw was his pale skin, his white hair and his red eyes. "May I introduce my companion", the Tom said. "This is the Moggy. Moggy, say hello"

"Who can I kill?", the huge man said with a gravelly voice, even if he seemed to have some problems in saying the words. The Tom shook his head. "That remains to be seen", he answered, just as Samantha gave Davith a slight nudge with her elbow. "Davith, see if you can pick that lock. We need to get inside", she whispered, realizing that the only way out of the hallway was blocked by the giant.

Even if she knew she wasn't loud, the Tom immediately looked at her. "Davith?", he asked. "Davith Lanser?" He started to chuckle. "That is a coincidence. Butterfly wants to talk to you, Davith. You killed some of his men, as I have heard. You've been a nuisance" Even if it was hard to tell with the mask, Samantha had the feeling he was looking at her. "You and your friend here have nothing to do with this. I have no problem with killing you, but if possible, I'd like to prevent a fight in the Citadel. You can leave, but Jaylon, Davith and the boy belong to us now" "Davith...", Samantha hissed, as the man tried to open the door with his lockpick. "I have a better idea", Sasha snarled. "You leave now, or we will cut you to pieces. You get neither Davith nor Dairon and not even Jaylon"

The Tom looked at the Moggy and let out a sigh. "Moggy", he said and the giant looked back at him. "Kill the Dothraki whore and Davith. Leave the pretty one and Jaylon alive", he ordered and the Moggy gave him a slow nod. "Davith...", Samantha hissed again. The man looked over his shoulder, at her and she saw fear in his eyes as he jumped up, starting to bang on the door.

"Archmaster!", he yelled. "Archmaester, open the door!"

For a moment, Samantha thought she would hear a faint "Go away" from inside of the room, but before she could react, a loud scream caused her attention to return to the Moggy. The giant raised his sword, pointing it at Sasha, as he let out a loud warcry. Then, he started to charge at them.

"Archmaester!", Davith screamed again, now in open panic, as Jaylon bumped into him, in the attempt of going backwards. "Please, open the door!", Jaylon added as he joined in on the door-banging. Samantha and Sasha slowly walked backwards, as the giant ran down the long hallway, straight into their direction.

The creaking sound of the massive door behind them getting opened was the sweetest thing Samantha had heard in a long time. She looked over her shoulder, to see a man in his late fifties at least, with thin grey hair, a short beard and pasty, pale skin. He was wearing a simple, brown robe and around his neck, a chain consisting entirely of Valyrian Steel. The look in his bright blue eyes was furious as he glared at the group in front of him. Behind him, Samantha saw a room, filled with shelves full with books. In the middle of the room, a crude-looking thing stood on the ground, not taller than her forearm, looking almost like a candle that consisted entirely of dark glass. And behind the candle-thing stood Dairon. Samantha remembered the boy from his stay at the Hammered Harp Inn several weeks ago. A lanky, pale boy with red hair and too many freckles, always a sheepish look on his face. His blue eyes widened as he looked at Samantha, apparently recognizing her.

"What's the meaning of...", the Archmaester attempted to say, as Jaylon already pushed him to the ground in the attempt of running into the chamber. Davith quickly followed, then came Samantha, who turned around to see that Sasha had hesitated a moment too long.

The look in Sasha's eyes told Samantha that she realized that the Moggy at full speed was too fast for her to reach the Archmaester's chamber. Instead of trying it, Sasha jumped to the side, barely avoiding the Moggy's massive blade in the process, while using her arakh and the Moggy's own speed to painfully slice across the giant's upper leg.

Almost immediately, the Moggy went on his knees, still towering every man Samantha ever met, while his warcry turned into a painful groan. Sasha raised her arakh in the attempt of targeting the unprotected back of the Moggy's neck, but the huge man was faster than expected. The moment Sasha's blade came close to his neck, he raised his sword and managed to deflect the attack. Instead, the arakh grazed his shoulder.

Quickly and remarkably graceful, Sasha tried to strike again, but this time, the Moggy managed to grab the long hilt of her sword, while he got back on his feet. Effortlessly, he twitched the arakh from her hands, while trying to impale her with his greatsword. To evade the attack, Sasha had to let go of her sword, as she jumped behind him, deeper into the hallway.

"Sam, we need to close the door!", Davith urged her and she realized that she blocked the doorway. "Fuck off, we're not leaving her!", she hissed. "Sasha! Get in here!" The woman threw her a helpless glance, as she was trapped between the enraged Moggy and the Tom, who stood at the other end of the hallway. The giant was now holding his greatsword with his right hand, while simultaneously holding Sasha's arakh with his left. His wounded shoulder didn't even slow him down as he struck at her with both weapons at the same time. Sasha dodged the greatsword and did a roll sideways to evade her arakh, past the Moggy again and closer to the door.

Before the Moggy managed to strike again with his greatsword, Sasha managed to pull a small dagger from her belt. As soon as the giant man raised his sword, she leaped towards him and embedded the knife into his closed fist. The Moggy jumped back and let out a pained howl, dropping his greatsword in the process.

Immediately, Sasha turned away from him and darted towards the Archmaester's room, the enraged giant close behind her. "Bloody hell", Davith mumbled, before he took a step out of the door, in his hand a small throwing knife. He threw it, above Sasha's head, hitting the Moggy in the chest, which wasn't even enough to slow him down. Immediately, Davith pulled out a second knife, throwing it at the Moggy's wounded shoulder and again, the giant barely seemed to notice it. "Are you fucking kidding me?", Davith cursed, as Sasha ran past him and into the room. In the last moment, he turned around himself and ran into the room, just in time for Samantha and Jaylon to close the massive door.

To Samantha's surprise, the door held, even though the Moggy's massive body slammed against it. The giant let out an enraged howl as he started to bash at the door. "Come on, we need to barricade it!", Jaylon shouted, immediately running towards the closest shelf, only to be stopped by the surprisingly agile Archmaester. "Not this one!", he yelled, pointing at another shelf. "If you have to, take that. This one contains valuable..." Before he could continue, Jaylon cut him off. "Do I look like I care?", he asked, but he indeed ran to the shelf the Archmaster pointed at. Together with Davith's help, he managed to carry it towards the door, where the two men tried their best to barricade it despite the constant blows the Moggy threw at it.

Samantha looked around, at the visibly confused Archmaester, the scared-looking Dairon and at Sasha, who was breathing heavily, standing in the middle of the room with widely opened eyes. "Are you alright?", Samantha asked and put a hand on her shoulder. Sasha gave her a slow

nod, her gaze focussed at the door. "He took my sword", she mumbled. "That bastard still has my sword"

"He nearly killed you as well", Samantha answered and gave her a smile. "That was close. Glad you made it" Sasha only shook her head. "We're not safe yet", she stated, pointing at the door, before she glared at the Archmaester. "You there! How long will this door keep him out?", she asked. The Archmaester glared back at her and slightly shrugged. "Maybe fifteen minutes. That door was designed to as resilient as possible", he answered. "But could anyone here please explain to me what this is about?"

Sasha gave Samantha a short nod and glanced at Dairon. "I take care of the Archmaester. You talk to the boy", she said, before she walked closer to the old man. Samantha let out a sigh and looked at Dairon, who still seemed to be intimidated and overwhelmed by the situation. The boy looked back at her and she forced herself to smile at him.

"I remember you!", he exclaimed. "Your name is Samantha, right?" She gave him a nod and took two steps towards him. "Good to meet you again, Dairon", she greeted him. "Glad to see you're okay, even if the circumstances could be better" Her smile had little effect on the boy, who slowly shook his head. "This is because of me, right? And because of the last will", he mumbled. "These people are after me and I endangered Lucas and Leonard and..." He looked up, as he realized something and Samantha had to force herself to uphold her smile. "And Lunett...", Dairon mumbled. "She stayed behind when the men came for me. She tried to barricade the door, just like your friends do right now, tried to give me time. It's my fault" He bit his lip with regret and looked her in the eyes. "What happened to my friends?", he asked.

Samantha gulped as she thought about what she could tell him now. The boy was on the verge of a breakdown and she didn't want to make his situation any worse. "First of all", she said sharply and raised a finger. "Never again say that this is your fault. The ones who are at fault are those masked monsters out there and the man they are working for. You did nothing wrong, nothing bad and you shouldn't think that way" She let out a sigh. "Trust me, once you start blaming yourself for something that's not your fault, there's no way back from it"

"As for your friends, it's complicated, but let me assure you, they are not dead" It was a lie, of course, and she felt bad for it, but the hint of a hopeful smile on Dairon's face was enough to justify it. "Why exactly are you here, Samantha?", he asked, sounding slightly more optimistic than before.

"Lunett's father is worried sick for her", she explained and her smile faded. "There has been an attack on his tavern. John and the others are alright, but Cass got killed. You remember the redhead?" Dairon gave her a sad nod and she continued. "I came for Lunett. I stayed to bring you and the rest of your friends out of this town again"

"But why?", Dairon asked again. "All of this just for Lunett? For Lucas and Leonard? For me?"

Samantha gave him a nod, followed by a grim smirk. "Sometimes, you just have to do the right thing", she answered. "I couldn't live with myself if I'd leave any of you behind in this city"

This seemed to please Dairon. The boy gave her a short smile, that faded quickly again. "But...

These people could kill you! Aren't you afraid? How do you manage to stay calm?", he asked.

This time, Samantha shook her head and raised her slightly shivering hand. "I am not calm", she answered. "I am afraid. I don't want to die in this shitpile of a city, but I don't allow my fear to prevent me from doing what's right. Sometimes, you just have to be brave"

Dairon let out a sigh. "I don't know if I can", he answered softly. "When the men arrived at the inn, when Lunett told me to run... I have never been that afraid in my life. Not even when Maester Eaton died" He looked up, straight in her eyes and pressed his lips together. "I don't want to die"

The desperation in his eyes caused Samantha to lean forwards and to hug him. She noticed how tensed up he was, how much he shivered, even though he calmed down as he lay in her arms. "And you won't", she promised and rested her hands on his shoulders, looking him sternly in the eyes. "I won't allow it. These men out there? If they want to get you, they have to go through me first"

She looked at her group. Sasha, still talking to Archmaester Wulvren, arguing, explaining the situation. Davith and Jaylon, holding the door against the Moggy. "And through them", she answered and pointed at Sasha. "You see her? That's Sasha. I couldn't have done that without her help" Sasha looked up for a moment and gave her the hint of a smile.

"The handsome one at the door is Davith", Samantha continued and Davith looked over his shoulder. "I heard that", he smirked, which caused her to sigh. "And he heard that. Great...", she chuckled. "The other one is Jaylon. He did a lot of mistakes and this is his chance to set things right" Now, she looked back at Dairon. "We will get you out of here"

"And perhaps I can help with this", a new voice proclaimed. As Samantha looked up, she saw that Sasha and the Archmaester had finished their talk and were now looking at her. The old man took a step forwards and gave her a strong handshake. "Wulvren Fossoway, Archmaester of Magic, at your service", he introduced himself. "Samantha Ducard", Samantha answered.

"Pleasure to meet you, Archmaester, despite the circumstances"

"I admit, your presence here is disturbing for my work. I have been attempting to perform a highly interesting ritual involving this", Wulvren continued and pointed at the glassy thing that stood in the middle of the room. "This is a Valyrian glass candle, a gift from Lord Daemion Targaryen. If we manage to ignite it, we should be able to..." He cut himself off and gave her an apologizing smile. "Excuse my rambling. Right now, we have more important things to do"

“So, how exactly will you be able to help?”, Sasha asked and for a moment, Samantha saw excitement in her eyes. “Will you throw a fireball at this giant? Or will you strangle him with his own shadow?” Wulvren gave her an irritated frown and vehemently shook his head. “Young woman, I am afraid you have a wrong idea about what kind of magic I perform here. I’m not the kind of mage that throws fireballs or turns an enemies shadow against them. I research real magic”

“Oh...”, Sasha remarked in obvious disappointment. “In Volantis I once saw a man who could vanish in shadows, only to appear at a completely different location. He was able to form shapes out of shadows and he even caused them to move on their own”

“Shadowbinders”, Wulvren growled. “Incompetent fumbler. They meddle with powers they don’t understand. No, young lady, I firmly believe that understanding something as powerful as magic should come first, before people try to...” He paused for a moment and gestured with his hands. “Throw fireballs or cause earthquakes with their hands. Besides, even in the old days, very few were able of such great feats of magic. Ever since the Doom came upon Valyria, only a selected few are still able to use magic at all. I can assure you, whatever you saw in Volantis was little more than a phony”

“So... no fireballs?”, Sasha asked again and let out a sigh. “Can you do anything at all to defeat this monster in front of your door?” A triumphant smile appeared on Wulvren’s wrinkled face and he gave her a quick nod. “There is one certain type of magic that can be used by everyone who is trained in it, even now, long after the Doom”, he explained, before looking at one of the bookshelves. “I only need a moment and I can show you!” With these words, he sprinted to the shelf, starting to look through the books.

“I swear, if he starts to talk about the magic of friendship and love, I throw him out of the window...”, Sasha growled and despite the situation, Samantha had to chuckle at this. “Don’t be so negative”, she grinned. “I’m sure he talks about...”

“Pyromancy!”, the Archmaester cut her off, presenting a large, black book. “Yeah, Pyromancy. That’s what I wanted to say”, Samantha mumbled. “Uh, what is Pyromancy?” Wulvren came closer again, a fascinated look in his eyes. “It’s not quite the same as throwing a fireball, but it comes close”, he explained. “I will show it to you. And more importantly, I will show it to the men who try to break into my chamber!”

A cracking noise was heard from the door, and both, Davith and Jaylon let out a surprised scream as the door started to splinter. “A little help here!”, Davith yelled and Sasha immediately darted towards them, assisting them in holding the door against the giant at the other side of it.

“That won’t suffice!”, Jaylon yelled. “We can’t hold him out much longer!”

“I’m on it!”, Samantha answered, as she attempted to run towards them, but Archmaester Wulvren’s thin, but surprisingly strong hand grabbed her shoulder, holding her in position. “No,

Samantha, I need your help here”, he said sternly and something in his voice immediately caused her to stop. “Then I'll help you!”, Dairon exclaimed as he ran towards the door in her stead.

“So... isn't he your apprentice?”, Samantha asked, as she watched Dairon, Davith, Jaylon and Sasha who tried to hold the door against the Moggy. Wulvren gave her a nod as he turned around to one of the shelves, taking out a bottle that contained a light red liquid and a second one, that only contained black powder. “He is”, Wulvren answered. “Sadly, I doubt he can throw a torch”

“And why should he do that? Do you plan to douse the Moggy in oil?”, Samantha asked and Wulvren shook his head in an irritated way. “You'll see”, he answered ominously. “I need you to take the torch over there. On my signal, you throw it”

With these words, he started to fill the powder into the bottle with the liquid, while a wicked grin appeared on his face. “They called me a fool for forging and alchemy link. They called me a fool for studying magic. Oh, I'd love to see their faces now”, he chuckled, before the grin on his face vanished. He looked at the door, while Samantha grabbed the torch from the nearest wall. “Now, jump back and let him in! We only have one try!”

While Dairon and Jaylon immediately jumped back, Davith gave him a confused look. “Are you out of your...?”, he tried to say, before Sasha grabbed him and jumped to the ground with him. The door was torn open, revealing the massive body of the Moggy. He was breathing heavily, grabbing his own sword with the right hand and Sasha's large arakh with his left. Without saying a word, he slowly stepped into the room, his red eyes glared at Wulvren and Samantha. The Archmaester raised the bottle and with surprising accuracy, threw it at the Moggy, managing to hit his chest. “Now!”, he shouted. And Samantha threw the torch.

She expected many things. Or better, she expected nothing at all. But the flash of lighting, followed by the deafening noise sent her to the ground in terror. As she opened her eyes again, she noticed that the Moggy lay on the ground as well, even if he was still breathing. His tunic was torn to shreds and he was bleeding badly, but the fact that he was still alive was remarkable. Davith and Dairon lay on the ground next to him, slowly looking up, while Sasha and Jaylon were already back on their knees, looking at the Archmaester in amazement. Wulvren was the only one who still stood, a triumphant smile on his face. “That, my friends, is pyromancy!”, he exclaimed.

Before he was able to say anything else, Davith jumped up and grabbed the nearest weapon, Sasha's arakh. He raised it above his head, trying to kill the Moggy while he was down and wounded. Again, the giant's speed came as a surprise, as the Moggy managed to take his own sword and parried the strike, while slowly getting back on his feet. “This... hurt!”, he huffed slowly. “I'm going to kill you!”

Despite his wounds, the Moggy attacked Davith and even though his attack was parried, the force of his blow was strong enough to send his opponent back on the ground. He raised his sword and Samantha tried to run towards him, even if the explosion still caused her legs to be slightly shaky. She knew, she wouldn't be fast enough...

"You won't hurt anyone else!", the voice of Dairon sounded, as he jumped at the giant in an attempt of tackling it to the ground. Of course, he failed, but he at least managed to throw a punch at the Moggy's wounded chest. The giant let out an agonizing scream and eased the grip on his sword. Instead of dropping it though, he tried to hit Dairon, succeeding in grazing his chest.

The following seconds seemed almost unreal for Samantha. In shock, she saw blood spilling from Dairon's chest. Just as the boy went to the ground, she was there, preventing him from falling. She held Dairon, as they both softly sunk to the ground. The Moggy growled at her and raised his sword. And then, she saw it. The giant was... smoking. Not his body, but the remains of his tunic. Only a few seconds later, the smoke turned to flames, as he let out an agonizing scream.

Burning brightly, the Moggy staggered backwards, slowly at first, then quickly, as he ran back through the corridor, howling in pain, trying to get off his burning clothes. Samantha had no doubt that he would survive, but for now, he chose to retreat. Out of narrowed, tear-stained eyes, Samantha saw the Tom glaring at her, before he turned around as well, not running, but merely walking after his fleeing henchman.

And then, the realization of what just happened hit her like the kick of a horse. Dairon was wounded! She was holding him, he was bleeding, shivering, wailing in pain. Her own hands that rested on his chest were already stained with his blood. "Fuck...", she mumbled. "Dairon! Dairon, do you hear me?"

He gave her a weak nod. "It hurts...", he mumbled. And then, Sasha was there, kneeling next to her, as she carefully inspected the wound. Samantha had no doubt that Dairon failed to notice her slight head-shaking. Samantha only had to look at the wound for a moment to realize that not even the Archmaester of Healing could help the boy now.

"Dairon, I need you to stay awake!", she exclaimed with shaky voice. "Concentrate on my voice. Everything is going to be fine. We can help you..." The thin voice of Dairon managed to cut her off. "Liar...", he mumbled. "You were right... sometimes you just have to be brave" He looked at Davith, who slowly stumbled back onto his feet and a proud smile appeared on his face. "I saved his life..."

"You did", Samantha agreed. "And you will survive, you hear me. It looks good, honestly" She knew, it was a weak lie, but she had to say something, mostly to calm herself. "The others...", Dairon mumbled. "Where are they? Lucas, Leonard... Lunett"

Samantha closed her eyes, trying her best to hold back her tears. "Lunett is fine", she lied and forced herself to smile brightly. At least that was something she was good at. The look in Dairon's eyes made it clear that he believed her. "We managed to save her. She's fine. Lucas and Leonard are a bit wounded, but we saved them as well. They are all fine"

"That's... good to hear...", Dairon mumbled. He moved one of his bloodstained hands towards his pocket. "You take it...", he said softly, before he started to cough and with terror, Samantha saw that he was coughing blood. "Hurts... so much...", the boy mumbled weakly. "Don't want to die here..." His body grew limp, even if Samantha still needed another moment to realize that she was looking into the eyes of a dead man. And then, finally, she failed at holding back her tears.

Almost in a trance, she raised from the ground, looking at the shocked faces of Sasha, Davith, Jaylon and Archmaester Wulvren. She looked down at the thin body, slightly shaking her head as she reached down into his pocket, pulling out a document, the seal of House Raylan on top. "Shit...", she heard Jaylon mumbling. "Listen I am..."

Her glare cut him off. "No", she said. "I don't want to hear it. He is dead, we are alive. There's nothing left to say" She closed her eyes, as she felt a hand on her shoulder. She did not resist as Sasha pulled her into a loose hug. As she rested her head on the other woman's shoulder, she finally realized how tired she was and how much she needed this right now, as brief as it was.

"How were they able to find us here?", Davith mumbled and Samantha already knew the answer before Jaylon confirmed her assumption. "Lucas", he answered. "We have to hurry, or else he's just another corpse"

Samantha shot him another glare, as she separated from Sasha. To her surprise, she noticed that the other woman looked just as distraught as she felt herself. "Then we will hurry", she decided weakly. "Somehow. We need a plan, we need anything, we need..." Her gaze fell on Dairon's dead body and she cut herself off again. "I failed them... Lunett, Dairon..."

"You saved Leonard", Sasha remarked and Samantha shook her head. "Who knows what will happen to him?", she mumbled and her gaze hardened. "No... even if I have to tear the whole Hightower to the ground, we *will* get him out of there!"

To her surprise, Jaylon was the first to give her an enthusiastic nod. "You can count on me!", he proclaimed and Davith gave him a glare. "And on me, always", he added. Sasha said nothing at first, she only gave her a reassuring nod, followed by a sigh. "One day, you'll be the death of me", she mumbled. "But I'll be damned if I'm going to leave you now"

"Perhaps I can help as well", Wulvren interjected and Samantha gave him a surprised look. The Archmaester seemed collected, considering that his apprentice just bled out on his own floor, but a look into his eyes revealed a deep sadness and an understanding for Samantha's current

situation that needed no words. "You want to leave this city, right? I know, the city gates are not an option and neither are the docks... but I know the right people, people who know ways out of this city... As soon as you have saved your knight, approach me again and I will be able to help you"

Samantha gave him a thankful nod. "They could return...", she remarked, but Wulvren only shook his head. "If they do... well, I have something special for them", he answered grimly, before smiling at them, surprisingly friendly. "You can count on my help. For Dairon" He looked at the body and closed his eyes for a moment. "Leave now. I will take care of this, trust me"

They walked back to Davith's house in complete silence. Samantha was in no mood to talk. She hated, dreaded this mood. She was close to loose control again. She was so close to getting her revenge on the man that killed her family. And Lunett, and Dairon and maybe even Lucas... So close, yet so far

Davith's house was closer to the Citadel than she remembered. She barely paid attention to the way back, to the mouldy hallway that lead to Davith's rooms, to the hollow faces of Sasha, Jaylon and Davith. She only started to pay attention to her surroundings again as she entered Davith's living room and saw Leonard leaning against the wall.

"You're back!", he exclaimed with a smirk. "Where's Dairon?" Before anyone could answer, Davith walked towards him in surprise. "Leonard... you should be asleep by now. How can you even stand?" The knight let out a short chuckle. "Your neighbour was here. She gave me something against the pain! I can walk, do you see? It barely hurts! I can even fight" His grin faded as he realized that Dairon wasn't with them. "Now, where's...", he stuttered and Samantha shook her head. "I'm sorry", she mumbled.

"Fuck!", Leonard exclaimed and slammed his fist against the wall, a distraught expression on it. "No! This... No!" The hint of tears formed on his face, even if he was remarkably and admirably calm. "First Lunett, now Dairon...", he hissed and glared at Samantha. "You plan on leaving Lucas to die as well?"

"Okay, that is...", Sasha started to say, but Samantha cut her off. "No", she answered decidedly. "What do you want, Leonard? Yes, I failed to save Lunett, I failed to save Dairon, but what the hell do you want now?" The angry glare on Leonard's face vanished as he let out a sigh.

"Helping you", he answered. "Lucas was my friend as well. And I failed to save Lunett and Dairon as well. I can..." Davith cut him off with a handwave. "That's out of question. You shouldn't even walk! Right now, you have no pain, but who guarantees that it will stay that way? Perhaps you're making it only worse", he said

"I don't care!", Leonard spat. "I can walk and more importantly, I can fight. I can help you! Even if you have to use me to trick the guard to let you inside, I am sure there is something I can do"

Davith crossed his arms and shook his head. "You can rest. You can heal. But going with us is too dangerous" He looked at Samantha, slightly upset. "Sam, please tell me you're not considering that"

"Well... I know I'm the last person you want to hear right now", Jaylon remarked. "But he is a damn fine fighter. He fought against Samuel Harrington and survived. And he can obviously stand. Fuck, give him his armour and he will be worth ten guardsmen" Both, he and Davith looked at her, while Leonard nervously clenched his fists. "Of course, the decision is yours. You want to take the risk of taking him with you? Or do you want to take the risk of leaving him here?"

[Allow Leonard to help]

Marak

"And then I said...", Marak slurred as he looked at Irving, trying his best to stay focussed. "Then I said... 'That's what she said!'" He burst into laughter and after a few, indecisive seconds, Irving joined in. "Hilarious!", he remarked, even if it was clear that he hasn't even listened.

"Anything the matter?", Marak asked after a while. It was clear that the other man had a very low tolerance for alcohol. Of course, Marak was almost completely sober. The slurred speech, the unfocussed gaze, that was all intentional. He was amazed that his body automatically managed to do these things, on top of giving him a slight headache. Years of training how to get drunken finally paid off!

Irving let out a sigh. "You know, I'd wish I could tell stories like these. Never had many friends or, well, romantic encounters...", he mumbled and Marak tried his best to look surprised.

"Surprising...", he muttered as an answer and was indeed surprised that Irving looked a bit upset at this answer.

"Nevermind", Irving mumbled. "I was asking going to ask a question with that, you know..." He let out a sigh. "I mean, you're so strong and confident and everybody likes you" Both instantly glanced at the fat inkeeper, who still glared at Marak after he had tried to pour himself another mug of ale. His hand was still slightly hurting, after she had hit him with that massive spoon she was wearing on her belt. "Well, almost everyone likes you", Irving corrected himself. "How do you do it?"

"Now, Irving, don't get me wrong on this one, but your problem is that you are an asshole", Marak answered and quickly raised his hands as Irving glared at him. "And I mean this with the utmost respect. I said, don't get me wrong on this one!"

Irving pressed his lips together and slightly shook his head. "What do you want to say, Marak?", he asked and a big grin appeared on Marak's face. He had always been good at giving advice, among other things. "Being an asshole is not bad, you know, as long as you still have some

positive qualities that bring people to like you”, he explained and flexed his muscles. “Like these” He flashed his most charming grin and gave the pretty barmaid a wink. “Or that”, he continued, hoping that Irving wouldn't notice the wench's annoyed look.

As he looked at Irving, he shook his head. Even ripped with muscles, Irving wouldn't have been a handsome man. To make things worse, he was incredibly out of shape. And then there was... “You on the other hand have no real positive qualities and that's something you should change”, he explained. “You need to loose a bit of weight and you need to get rid of your moustache”

This time, Irving narrowed his eyes and even looked hurt for a moment. “What's wrong with my moustache? I once saw a man from Braavos who looked dashing with it”, he moaned.

“Dashing...”, Marak mumbled and had to suppress a chuckle. “A moustache is never dashing, it only shows your inability to grow a full beard. When it comes to facial hair, you either grow a full beard, or you shave it off completely. There's no middle ground”

Irving even looked mildly convinced as he gave him the hint of a nod. “So, shaving, loosing weight... and that's going to make people like me?”, he asked and this time, Marak realized what this was about. “You're talking about that ambassador lady, don't you?”, he asked. For a moment, Irving looked around, almost expecting her to stand behind him, before he nodded slightly. “Maybe”, he mumbled, but Marak instantly knew that he meant 'Yes'.

“You told me you saved her life once, isn't that right?”, he asked and Irving hastily shook his head. “Twice”, he corrected him. “First in the Dyre Den. I'm sure she kept one of her daggers just because of my warnings. Sure, she never mentioned it, but Maya has never been a very grateful person, you know. And later, in the forest, where I shot a bandit who was about to spot her position” He let out a long sigh. “And even then, she never thanked me”

Marak gave him a nod, as he thought about good advice. He knew, his advice was the best, but Irving was a hard case. “I see your other problem. Even if you act like you don't give a flying fuck about other people's opinion on you, you still value hers”, he deduced ingeniously.

“I... suppose you are right”, Irving mumbled. “I do value her opinion, you know, but I can't recall a single instance where she said anything nice to me. Hell, I've accompanied her from Gulltown to Raylansfair, through three kingdoms and she still trusts that wolf guy more than me”

“I see...”, Marak mumbled and gave the other man a pat on the shoulder. “You know what, next time you see her, you talk to her, okay? Tell her how you feel not appreciated enough” Irving slightly shook his head. “And what if she does not appreciate me? I mean, what if she even sends me away?”, he asked.

“I'm sure she does appreciate you”, Marak tried to reassure him. “No one who does not appreciate you could put up with you for so long” This in turn caused Irving's face to get a hopeful look on it. “You mean...”, he mumbled and his mouth formed a smile. “You are right! As soon as she returns, I will talk to her. Seven Hells, I need to think about what to say to her”

"That's the spirit!", Marak complimented him, before he noticed that Irving's smile vanished again. "What is it?", he asked. Irving raised his finger and pointed directly at Marak. "Be... Behind you...", he stuttered and Marak narrowed his eyes, before he looked over his shoulder. "Oh fuck...", he mumbled. Behind him, obviously slightly annoyed, stood Noelle.

"Hello, Marak", she greeted him with an unfitting coldness in her eyes, before she narrowed her eyes, as Irving extended his hand. "I... It's an honour. P... Priestess Noelle", he stuttered intimidated, as she looked at his hand for a moment. "You sit on my chair, Irving Todd", she remarked in slight disgust.

Irving's face showed his surprise, as well as his shock, as Noelle called him by name. He immediately jumped up, deeply bowing in front of her. "Of course, priestess!", he exclaimed. "Please, don't turn me into a rat!"

"A rat?", Noelle asked in slight surprise and raised one of her eyebrows. "That would at least explain a lot..." Only Marak noticed the amused streak on her mouth. "Now leave, Irving, or else I can't make any promises"

Marak wasn't surprised that the other man immediately followed this order. He gave Marak a nod, before making his way to another table, far away from Noelle. The priestess smirked as she looked after him, before sitting down on the chair he just gave up for her. "Your advice is horrible. This poor man will make even more of a fool out of himself now", she remarked. "I was surprised that you stayed away from me this whole evening" Marak gave her a guilty nod. "I made some new friends", he tried to defend himself, but quickly realized that she wasn't interested in his version of the story.

The priestess opened her mouth, as if she wanted to say something, slightly confused, as she glanced at Irving. "Rats?", she asked. Marak pressed his lips together. "I... may have told him a few things that are not exactly true", he apologized and Noelle let out a sigh. "You know I can't actually do that, right?", she asked. "Now... frogs on the other hand..."

She smirked, but only until she noticed the shocked expression on Marak's face. "That was supposed to be a joke", she slowly mumbled. "I don't turn people into animals. Anyway, I assume you have questions about what happened today"

Marak gave her the hint of a nod, even if he wanted to shake his head, as always in such a situation. He was a professional, he never asked questions. But this time... Noelle was something else and her plan was shady at best. "So... a child?", he asked and Noelle gave him a reluctant nod. "I don't like it either", she confessed. "Trust me, if I would see another way, I would take it"

"But why?", Marak asked and this time, he saw reluctance on Noelle's face. "The fire demands it", she revealed. "The nature of my visions is not always clear to me, but in this case, it has been shockingly obvious. This child, a little girl to be precise, is currently in a city south of here"

Her strangely reddish brown eyes looked at him with regret. "I presume you have heard about Oldtown?", she asked.

This time, Marak spat on the ground. "I fucking hate Oldtown", he muttered. "Last time I've been there, some sort of street war was about to start. I'm glad I got away without getting involved" Noelle nodded in agreement. "So am I", she answered. "And I don't plan to get involved either, be assured. But this little girl is currently in Oldtown"

"So, what is it this little girl has to die for", Marak asked and Noelle let out a sigh. "She's as innocent as a girl can be. But sooner or later, she will arrive here, in Raylansfair. Her presence will cause a chain reaction of death and destruction", she mumbled. "Trust me, I don't like it, I really don't. I pray every night that the god changes his mind. If he does, the girl is free to go. But as long as R'hllor insists on the girl's death... Tell me, who am I to refuse the wish of a god?" Before Marak could answer, something caught his mind. A slight scream sounded as he moved his head to the centre of the tavern. The tall sellsword leader, Second Sonds according to his tabard, a tall, ugly and bald man with a bushy beard and a damn fine sword had raised from his chair. At his feet knelt the barmaid, not the skinny one and thankfully not the pretty one, but the chubby, plain one that looked like the innkeeper and held her cheek.

"What have you said, girl?", the sellsword leader growled with an angry tone in his voice, moving a hand to the hilt of his sword, just as the fat innkeeper moved a hand to her belt, where her spoon hung. Marak knew, she was going to intervene, even if it meant going against this obviously dangerous man. But as her and Marak's eyes met, he saw an understandable fear in them. He clenched his fists and gulped as he thought about intervening himself. But, would it be worth it, provoking an obviously dangerous man just for the gratitude of the least attractive barmaid in the whole kingdom?

[Intervene]

Willfred

"This way", the disgruntled guardsman muttered, leading Willfred, Roger and Tallian through the upper floors of Raylansfairs only tavern. The hallway was only dimly illuminated and the air was sweaty, reminding Willfred of the old silver mines below Castamere.

"So... I don't think I got your name, Ser", Roger remarked, looking at the guardsman. "I am no Ser", he growled. "My name is Malkolm Sternhelm" Obviously in a far better mood than their guide, Roger gave him a smile. "Why the long face, my friend? Is anything the matter?"

The guardsman shook his head. "Nothing that's your fault", he growled. "The fact that I'm still sober while the rest of the guard gets to drink, that's what annoys me" Tallian and Roger exchanged a glance and the general cleared his throat. "Someone has to guard your lord, isn't

that right?", he asked. Malkolm shook his head. "He does not fear anything in this city. He is the rightful lord of Raylansfair, after all"

"And that makes him invulnerable? Immune to poison? Does it guarantee that everyone loves him?", Tallian asked. "I have seen enough dead lords in my life, guardsman, some of them even killed by their own people"

"Well, Lord Hobert has a different opinion on this", Malkolm hissed. "I don't like his carefree attitude either, but I follow his orders" He let out a sigh. "And his orders have been to relax and enjoy life, at least for a few days"

"Suicidal overconfidence", Roger remarked. "What if King Gardener does not acknowledge his claim?" Malkolm shrugged. "Then we return to Mander's Mouth, I assume. I don't know what he plans", he answered and stopped in front of a small door. "But you best ask him yourself" With these words, he knocked on the door.

For a moment, there was only silence. "What is it?", a male voice answered and a young woman chuckled behind the door. Malkolm slightly rolled with his eyes. "The delegation of the Rock wishes to speak to you, mylord", he explained.

Again, silence. Then, an audible sigh. "The door is open", the voice said. "Come in, but I have to warn you. I am not alone" Malkolm opened the door, revealing a surprisingly well-furnished room, most likely the best this tavern had to offer. Willfred immediately spotted a young, pretty girl, perhaps roughly in his age, with blonde hair, a shy smile on her lips as she saw the men, while she was quickly getting dressed.

She stood next to a bed, on which a man was lying, in his mid-twenties at most, with short, unremarkably brown hair and eyes of the same colour. He was wearing a long, yellow robe, that almost made him look like a dornishman, but his thin, skinny build failed to achieve the look he was obviously going for. The only positive feature about his appearance was the charming smile on his face.

"I should leave, mylord", the young woman said and the man raised from the bed. "As much as your absence will pain me, my dear, I am afraid you are right", he said and moved a hand to the small purse on his belt, revealing a single silver coin.

"Mylord, but we haven't even...", the young woman started to protest, but the man cut her off by putting a finger on her lips. He gently put the coin into her hand, before he closed it and kissed her fingers. "Our conversation has been delightful", he said. "It would be outrageous to let you leave without a reward"

She let out a joyful giggle, as she looked at the silver coin. Slightly blushing she moved past Willfred, out of the door. The man gave her a long look, before he let out a sigh. "This city is so full of beauty", he remarked. "Nothing like Mander's Mouth. Please, come in, be my guests" He

took an elegant bow in front of them and as he looked up, Willfred saw a shrewd intelligence in his eyes. "Hobert Lowther, Lord of Mander's Mouth and Raylansfair", he introduced himself.

"Vashord Tallian", Tallian answered. "General of the Rock's armies. The men in my company are Ser Roger Hill, the bastard of Castamere and his nephew, Ser Willfred Reyne" The last name caused Hobert's smile to get wider. "Reyne!", he exclaimed. "That is a name I have heard a lot about. Please, Ser Willfred, come closer, grab a seat"

He quickly moved through the room, grabbing a small carafe and four cups, before he sat down on a chair. Willfred, Tallian and Roger walked towards him, each sitting down, while Malkolm saluted and closed the door. "A bit of wine, mylords?", Hobert asked. "It's a wonderful evening and no one should spend it with a dour expression on their faces" As he said this, he looked at Tallian, who indeed frowned at these words. "I don't drink", he answered. "Lord Hobert, there is a lot we have to talk about"

Hobert gave him a short nod, but instead focussed his gaze on Willfred. "Ser Willfred, why have you travelled the long way from Castamere to Raylansfair?", he asked. For a moment, Willfred was unsure how open he could be with this man. Tallian gave him an encouraging nod, while Roger subtly shook his head.

"We came here because the old lord of Raylansfair made us a promise, Lord Hobert", Willfred finally explained. He knew, he wasn't a skilled liar and he felt bad at considering to hide the truth, so he simply decided to be honest with Hobert. "The Kingdom of the Rock needs the help of the Reach, to secure our southern borders"

"Your southern borders?", Hobert asked and raised an eyebrow. "You share your southern borders with the Reach. Every other border is threatened by the Ironborn, as I have heard, but what danger comes from your southern border?"

"Also the Ironborn", Tallian answered shortly. "They cross the border in small groups, travelling through the Reach undetected, before they raid our southern towns. Most of the men from the south are needed in the North, to defend the Rock against the Iron Fleet and the Iron Army. We have no men left to defend the south as well"

"I think I understand your problem", Hobert mumbled. "I assume the Lord of the Reach were less than thrilled when you called for aid" Tallian gave him a quick nod. "To put it mildly", he answered. "With all due respect, but the lords of the Northern Reach are stubborn and selfish. Only Lord Robert Raylan promised help. Five hundred men to guard our southern border. Not much, but enough to make a difference. Lord Harris on the other hand..."

The smile on Hobert's face got wider. "Mylords, you've come to the right place if you're looking for help", he exclaimed, before he raised from his chair, walking towards the window. "This city isn't a small one, but still. Five Hundred men are a lot. I can understand Harris for refusing your call for aid. He wants to keep his people out of a war that is not theirs"

“Not yet”, Willfred remarked. “If the Rock falls, the Ironborn will advance. The Reach is rich and fertile, a perfect target for them. Only a fool would believe that Harren Hoare or his sons would miss an opportunity like that”

“There are no fools in this room, I can assure you of that”, Hobert answered immediately, before his facial expression darkened “Five hundred men... That is a lot, especially for Raylansfair. I know, Lord Raylans hatred for the Ironborn knew no boundaries, but still...” He looked up and Willfred shivered at the calculating look in Hobert's eyes. “Five hundred won't be enough to keep your southern borders safe”, he remarked. “So, what would you say if I'd give you a thousand?” “A thousand?”, Roger gasped. “There is no way Raylansfair could give us a thousand men!” Hobert shook his head. “Not only Raylansfair. But I am the lord of Raylansfair and Mander's Mouth. Giving you a thousand men would be easy for me” His smile turned into a sly smirk. “All you have to do is to openly declare your support for me, Ser Willfred. Mern Gardener has always valued the Rock's opinion. Think about it. You would gain more troops than you came for, and you only have to declare your support to the rightful lord of this city”

“Are you?”, Roger remarked and Willfred saw how Hobert's smile vanished immediately. “Am I what?”, he growled. “The rightful lord of Raylansfair”, Roger specified and Hobert gave him a decisive nod. “It's only a formality by now. I have sent a letter to the king. He in turn has sent his steward, Lord Harlen Tyrell to decide in his name. Lord Tyrell is expected to arrive on court day, five days from now and I am sure your open support for my cause will influence his decision”

“With all due respect, Lord Hobert, but are you sure that he will decide in your favour?”, Roger asked. “If we openly support you, but you fail to win this city, we will stand here without an ally. The new lord of Raylansfair will not forget whom we support”

“Indeed he won't”, Hobert remarked coldly. “I need your open support, in order to impress Lord Tyrell and the smallfolk of Raylansfair. I have no use for any kind of support that is not open. You know my offer. Once I have won, you'll get a thousand men for the Rock”

“If you win”, Roger answered. “Which I am not convinced of. I am sorry, Lord Hobert, but if these are your terms, I am not sure if we should agree. Perhaps it would be wiser to wait until Lord Tyrell decided in this matter”

“By then, Ser Roger, it will be too late to win my favour”, Hobert snarled, before he looked at Willfred. “But perhaps we should ask the only real nobleman in your small group. Ser Willfred, would you like to win my favour by supporting me openly, or would you like to crush your kingdom's chances for help by refusing?”

[Agree to support Hobert openly]

Lyria

"I won't do it", Lyria mumbled, her voice getting stronger and more angry with every second. "You're just going to kill her if I give up on my weapon" She glared at Wolfius, who had a twisted grin on his face. "Oh, what a clever little blacksmith you are", he complimented her. "But now, I'm going to kill her anyway" With these words, he started to apply pressure on his knife, causing the edge to slightly cut into Rosalie's belly.

The sound of her daughter crying in pain caused Lyria to boil with anger. She raised her hammer and charged at Wolfius, only to stop dead in her tracks as Wolfius pushed the knife deeper into Rosalie's belly, this time deep enough to stain her dress with blood. "For every step you take closer towards me, I'm going to hurt her a bit more", Wolfius growled. "So, think hard about your next action" Lyria just stood there, frozen in terror, as Rosalie let out increasingly panicked screams, before her body quickly grew limp.

"Huh...", Wolfius mumbled in genuine surprise. "Looks like your little whore is dead now" Just as he said this, he slightly shook Rosalie, who just hung in his arms, no sign of life. Lyria was hardly noticing the sick grin on his face, she was only able to look at her daughter. No... this couldn't be...

Finally, Wolfius let out a sigh and let go of Rosalie, who was still bleeding heavily. "I barely started with her. She was weak", he grinned. "I did you a favour, freeing you from her" As her daughter sank to the ground, so did Lyria, desperate tears of anger in her eyes. The moment Rosalie's body hit the floor, she let out a pained groan, opening her eyes for a moment.

"Get him, mother", she mumbled weakly, just as Wolfius violently kicked her in the lower back. "Think you're clever, bitch? Tricking me, playing dead... that won't save you, you little...", he spat, before he was cut off by Lyria's hammer hitting his cheek and sending him to the ground.

"Ow, you...", he managed to howl, his speech sounding slurred, as Lyria raised her hammer again. For a moment, she hoped to see fear in Wolfius' eye as he glared at her, but what she instead saw was violent anger. "You bitch!", he screamed as he jumped up, giving her a heavy blow to the chin before she was able to strike him again.

As Lyria staggered backwards, Wolfius darted forwards and slashed the knife across her face. Only her reflexes prevented him from slashing her throat. Instead, the crude blade hit her cheek, deeply cutting through it and severing the lower part of her left earlobe. Wolfius gave her no time to wince back, as he attacked again, this time slashing across her forehead horizontally, almost hitting her eyes in the process.

Lyria fell to the ground in pain and dropped her hammer in the process. Blood flew down from her forehead and into her eyes. Almost blinded, unable to see properly, she moved her hands over the ground, frantically searching for her hammer. Wolfius disturbingly joyful laughter

sounded in her ears and in the next moment, she felt his heavy boot stepping onto her right hand.

“My dear blacksmith Mettel, I'm going to enjoy this”, he growled. “It will take a while, but first I will...” He was cut off by a new, male voice, shouting from the outside. “Hey!”, the man yelled. “Get away from her!” In her dizzy, barely conscious state, Lyria remembered the open window. Someone saw them, someone would help them...

Pain, horrible pain flashed through her right arm, as Wolfius violently stomped onto her wrist, breaking it in the process. For a short moment, she was wide awake again, before the familiar, dizzy feeling returned. She felt Wolfius hand grabbing her hair, could feel his breath on her wounded ear. “Looks like you're going to live for another day”, he hissed, his voice shivering with hatred. “Although I doubt your daughter will survive the night. And now you know, I can always kill you. Whenever I want. Sleep well tonight, Lyria”

The heavy steps of someone running towards the window were audible and Wolfius released the pressure from her broken wrist and let go of her hair. Unable to keep her head up by her own strength, Lyria fell back onto the floor, heavily hitting her head. Just as Wolfius ran out of the backdoor, her savior jumped through the window.

“Lyria!”, the man yelled. “Lyria, do you hear me? Stay with me!” His voice sounded slightly familiar. “Rosie...”, she mumbled weakly and despite the blood in her eyes she saw that the man knelt down next to her daughter. “Fuck...”, he mumbled and Lyria finally found the strength to raise her left hand and to wipe the blood out of her eyes. Kneeling above Rosalie, a look of sheer terror on his face, stood Arthur Nathamer.

“Is she...”, Lyria managed to utter, trying to get back on her knees with her one good hand. Arthur's green eyes showed the shock he was in, his hands already stained with Rosalie's blood. “She is still alive”, he said and the relief almost sent Lyria back on the ground. “But I don't know for how long. We have to bring her to a healer”

“Healer?”, Lyria mumbled in confusion. “Eaton... he was the only one we had” Arthur quickly shook his head. “There is another one. A young woman, only a visitor in Raylansfair. Eaton had called for her when Lord Robert was sick, but she arrived too late to help him. Her name is... Mathea, I think”, he explained and a determined expression appeared on his face. “Perhaps she can still save your daughter” With these words, he effortlessly lifted Rosalie up in the air, gently holding her in his arms. “Lyria, I need you to come with me. It's not save here”, he urged her and despite the pain, despite the tiredness, Lyria managed to stagger back to her feet.

Out of her bloodshot eyes, she saw that Arthur gave her a weak smile, as he quickly turned to the backdoor. “Come on, follow me. You have to stay near me, but I can't slow down”, he exclaimed, as he already rushed out of the house. Lyria followed closely, mobilizing her last reserves to keep up with the guardsman.

"Where are we going?", she asked with a low voice and Arthur looked over his shoulder, not slowing down in the slightest. "Father and I greeted her in this city on Eaton's behalf two weeks ago. She currently lives in a small house near the northern southern wall", he explained and quickened his steps, up to the point where Lyria had problems following him. At this point, his tabard was stained with Rosalie's blood and Lyria realized that he was almost in a shock. But he managed to show a strength she was lacking at the moment. Lyria concentrated on him, followed him in a trance, through the nightly streets of Raylansfair. She felt watched.

It felt like hours until Arthur finally stopped in front of a small house, nothing more than a rundown shack, even though Lyria knew they had only walked for a few minutes. The house itself was as dark as the surrounding night, not a single light visible inside. "Damn it...", Arthur mumbled, as he tried his best to knock on the door, still holding Rosalie in his arms.

"Hey!", he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Please, we need your help! Open the door!" His knocking at the door soon turned into pounding, then he started to kick the door with his feet, while Lyria only managed to stay on her feet, leaning against the wall, her gaze fixed on the still breathing Rosalie. Her daughter had lost consciousness by now, she looked so pale, so cold, so frail...

Finally, she saw the light of a freshly ignited candle shining through the window, then she heard soft footsteps, until finally the door was opened. Behind it stood a young woman, in her early twenties at most. Her hair was as dark as a crow's feathers, contrasting quite strongly with her pale skin. In the light of the candle she was holding, her eyes had a strangely yellow, almost orange tone, not unlike the candle itself, and from the way she barely kept them open it was clear that Arthur had awoken her. "By the Seven, do you have any idea how late it...", she started to say with a sleepy voice, before her gaze fell upon the wounded Rosalie and her eyes widened.

"Bring her inside!", she ordered and her tiredness immediately seemed to be gone, just as her voice gained sharpness. She pushed the door open, revealing a single, simple room, the only furniture being a small bed next to the window, a large table with two chairs and a small cupboard. With quick steps, the woman rushed to the table, cleaning it with a handwave. "Put her on here!", she ordered hastily. "I need room to look at her."

While Arthur did as he was told, the healer rushed to the cupboard, quickly pulling out a small bag. She shortly glanced at Lyria, her eyes full of worry. "Lay down on the bed", she ordered softly. "I'll look after you once I've helped her"

She quickly rushed back to Rosalie, while Lyria did as she was ordered to do. Barely conscious, she laid down on the bed, the only thing that kept her awake was the pain and the fear of losing her daughter. "So...", Arthur mumbled, as the healer started to look onto Rosalie's wounds. "Your name is Mathea, right?"

She gave him a short nod, without answering, although her eyes widened as she inspected the wound. "My name is Arthur", Arthur introduced himself, apparently feeling the need to say something. "The girl is Rosalie, the woman over there is Lyria, her mother" As he said this, Mathea looked up for a moment, at the barely conscious Lyria. She pressed her lips together and quickly looked back at Rosalie. "Can I do anything...", Arthur again tried to say and this time, Mathea glanced at him. "Cubboard, upper drawer", she hastily ordered. "You'll find some candles. Ignite them, I need more light"

"That is a knife wound!", she exclaimed in surprise. "What happened to her?" Arthur, who started to use the already lit candle to ignite several more, gulped audibly before he found the courage to answer. "She was attacked", he explained. "By a madman, a serial..." He paused for a moment. "My sister...", he mumbled. "Seven Hells, I have left my sister alone at home! The man who did this to Rosalie is still out there. I..."

For a moment, Mathea paused her work and looked softly at Arthur. "Go home, Arthur", she said. "I don't need your help to save Rosalie's life. It's not the first time I do something like this" The guardsman gave her a thankful nod, but before he walked to the door, he gave Lyria a worried look. "Are you sure?", he asked. "This man could still be out there. He is dangerous and could be..."

Mathea gave him a determined nod. "I am not defenceless", she assured him. "I will be fine. But what I don't need is someone who is close to a panic while I have to save a girl's life. Go home, you did enough by bringing them here"

Arthur let out a sigh of relief, as he turned to the door. "I will be back in a few hours, once I made sure that Aditha is fine", he promised, speaking to no one in particular, before he stepped out of the door and into the night. Lyria and Mathea looked after him for a moment, before the healer resumed her work. Lyria glanced out of the window next to her and saw Arthur quickly walking down the streets. A small, stray dog sat on the street, illuminated by the night, calmly looking at the house without moving. After a few moments in which Lyria was almost sure that the animal was looking at her, it turned around and silently followed Arthur. She let out a sigh as she sank back on the bed. She had survived the night, she was still alive. But at what price?

No Choices for this part

Maya

Maya gulped, looking from Harris to Sherryl. "We have been sent to Raylansfair to retrieve a few documents", she explained. "Old documents that are of personal value to Lord Royce. Just a few old letters from what I've heard. Nothing too important, but he is willing to pay a handsome price for it" She immediately noticed how weak this lie was and suppressed the urge to sigh. Then again, she had managed to successfully tell weaker lies before.

The expression on Harris' stern face changed, into one of slight anger. He looked at his beautiful advisor and even though he seemed to calm down a bit the moment he lay eyes on her, his gaze immediately hardened as he glanced back at Maya. "You have been right, my love", he spoke and Sherryl gave him a bright smile.

"I know what kind of document you want, Ambassador Iresons", Harris revealed to Maya's surprise. "I have known it for a while now. Your precious kingdom is in danger. Argilac the Arrogant plans to invade you and the Bronze Lord sent you in a desperate attempt of stealing these documents, isn't that right?"

Maya and Ser Aldrik exchanged a surprised glance, before she looked back at Harris. "Lord Harris, this is wrong. We had no intentions of stealing your...", Ser Aldrik tried to intervene, but he was cut off by Harris, who slammed his fist down onto the table. "Silence!", he yelled. "I am not talking to you"

He moved his piercing green eyes back at Maya, who slightly shivered as she saw the anger in them. "Sherryl warned me not to trust you, that you would tell me lies to get whatever you want. Against her advice, I decided to give you a chance", he growled. "You proved her right by lying to me"

"Lord Harris", Maya answered, trying her best to stay calm. "My kingdom, my people need these documents. I can only ask for your forgiveness, I never meant to anger you. I was simply afraid you would refuse to give us these documents, should I tell you about their true importance"

"A justified fear", Sherryl remarked with a frustrating smirk. "After all, why should Lord Harris anger the Storm King by giving you these documents?" The two women glared at each other and Maya saw a catty joy in Sherryl's eyes. As if she noticed Maya's confusion, the smirk on her face turned infuriatingly wide. "Argella Durrandon is on her way to Raylansfair"

"Exactly", Harris remarked sullenly and Maya noticed that her mouth stood slightly open.

"Mylord, how do you know all of this?", she asked. Harris let out a sigh, half out of annoyance, half out of regret. "Sherryl knows a lot of things. She is a well-connected woman", he explained.

"Thanks to her advice, I can prepare for the coming storm. I can do the necessary things to protect my own people"

"And what is with my people?", Maya asked, as she thought about her family, about her friends, about Gregar, Irving, Aldrik, hell, even about Lord Royce. "If your precious Lady Sherryl knows so much, you know how the Storm King wages his wars. Are you really willing to doom thousands just to please Argilac Durrandon?"

Harris shook his head. "I am willing to doom millions more if it means that my people stay safe. This is the duty of a lord. I find no joy in what I have to do, Ambassador, but it is my only option. Argilac Durrandon plans to take this city and I have to win time if I want to find a way to prevent

him from doing so. The last thing I need is his hot-headed daughter losing her temper in the wrong moment, should she find out that I am helping her father's enemies"

Maya pressed her lips together, suppressing the urge to insult this self-righteous man and the pretty snake at his side, who would gladly doom her kingdom, her family, just to win some time.

"You and Lord Royce have a lot in common", she mumbled and noticed how Sherryl's smirk vanished. "At the very least admit it, Lord Harris Flowers. To save your people, you would even become a murderer" For one moment, Harris' facial expression lost every trace of calmness. A bitter, desperate look formed on his face and on Maya's as well. "The dead of the coming war will be on your shoulders", she hissed.

Harris finally managed to control his face again. Calm, but with shivering voice, he began to speak. "I believe we are done here, Ambassador Iresons", he growled with an icy cold voice and in this moment, Maya knew that he was a murderer, a true monster. Perhaps he had good intentions and in his case, she might have decided the same way. But just as he had his people to look after, she had her own. The bitter smirk on her face vanished, leaving only an expression of desperation on her face.

"This is not over", she hissed, but Harris shook his head. "This has been over before it began, Ambassador. Don't test me. You have no idea what I am willing to do for this city" He continued to say something else, but Maya didn't even listen. She spun around and stormed out of the chamber, Ser Aldrik following closely.

"Maya...", he urged her, but she did not stop. "Maya!", he tried again, as they had reached the courtyard. Finally, when they had left the castle behind, Maya turned towards him. "This bitch!", she exploded. "This poisonous snake on his shoulder. Fucking Sherryl! Fucking Harris! What kind of man would provoke a war for his own goals?"

"The kind of man who would do everything for his people", Aldrik mumbled, as the two continued their way through the nightly streets of Raylansfair. "He is good for this city, but terrible for everything and everyone else. I can understand him, I even admire his loyalty to this city" As he noticed Maya's glare, he let out a sigh. "A leader who would do everything for his people is the most wonderful and the most terrible thing in this world"

"Do you have family, Ser Aldrik?", Maya mumbled as they approached the tavern. The knight shook his head. "Not anymore", he answered. "Well, I still have", Maya answered. "My parents and four younger siblings. For their sake, this can't be it. We have to get these contracts. We have to prevent a war, because I just know, it will be fought on the back of my family and on countless other families. Never again dare to tell me how you admire this ruthless son of a bitch" They entered the tavern, immediately spotting Gregar and Irving sitting at an empty table. While Gregar had his usual sullen glare, Irving looked surprisingly pleased to see her. "Maya, over here!", he greeted her. As she approached, Gregar immediately noticed what happened. His

glare got even more sullen, while Irving had a truly annoying smile on his face. "Maya, if you have a moment. There's something I need to...", he started to say, but she cut him off by simply shaking her head. "Irving, it hasn't been the best day", she snapped. "So do me a favour and don't get on my nerves for once" His smile vanished and she noticed that she apparently hurt him. She let out a sigh, slightly regretful, but unable to apologize at the moment. Perhaps later. Now, she had to concentrate on the task at hand. Preventing a war. Saving the Vale. Saving her family.

"Do you had any success?", she asked, looking at Gregar. Her quiet companion gave her a nod. "Made some good contacts", he growled. "Met a guy who claimed to be able to sneak into that archive. He charges a lot, which proves to me that he's honest, most likely"

"Wait a moment...", Ser Aldrik mumbled. "Do you plan on breaking into the archive now?"

Gregar gave him a nod. "That was the plan, Ser", he mumbled. Aldrik gave Maya a somewhat shocked look. "Ambassador, this is madness. If we get caught, this lord would hang us. We have to find another way. Perhaps we find a way to convince him"

"Convincing this man?", Maya asked. "Really, Aldrik?" The knight sighed and shook his head. "I know it is not the best plan. But just stealing from these people? This would be a crime, ambassador. We can't act rash and foolish here. We have to try it with diplomacy" Gregar shook his head. "Too slow", he snarled. "We need to act as soon as possible, or else we loose our chance at saving the Vale. You tried it with diplomacy, Maya, and your diplomacy failed. Now we need to act, before it's too late. We need to break into this archive"

[Follow Gregar's plan]

Ilish

Ilish narrowed her eyes as she looked at the stranger with the widely brimmed hat. His whole face was hidden underneath it, but she had no doubt that he was currently looking in her direction, at the visibly shaken Daisy. "I'm going to throw that guy out if necessary", she hissed and Daisy gave her an alarmed stare. "But... what if he is dangerous?"

"Look at him", Ilish said and Daisy did her the favour, turning her gaze to the stranger. He was short, almost half a head shorter than Ilish, who always considered herself a small girl. On top of that, he was thin, scrawny, at least not threatening from his looks alone. However, his mannerisms were something else entirely. The way he just sat there, half in the shadows and completely motionless, his chest barely raising from his breath... Ilish could understand why Daisy was afraid of him. And because of that, she had to intervene.

She started to walk towards the stranger and Lawsen jumped up from his chair. "Wait for me", he called out for her and quickly walked up to her. "If that guy is dangerous, I can help you" Ilish raised an eyebrow as she looked at him. While Lawsen was a bit taller than she was, he was

almost as scrawny as the stranger. "You can help?", she asked. Lawsen was quick to nod and he even gave her a slight smile. "Don't judge a book by it's cover. That applies to me just as well as to that guy", he explained.

As they walked towards this strange man together, Ilish noticed that he barely seemed to react to their approaching. Instead, he sat there unsettlingly calm and without motion, his face still shrouded in shadows, but his gaze still focussed on Daisy, who was now working near the counter. He didn't even look up as Ilish and Lawsen stopped directly in front of his table. It was unnerving how she was still not able to see his face.

"Hey, you", she tried to start a conversation. As expected, he didn't react, even though his breathing got slightly raspy for a moment. "Do you hear me?", she asked again. "Can you understand me?" After she still got no reaction, Ilish let out a frustrated sigh.

"Okay, I know you can hear me. My name is Ilish, I am a barmaid. Listen, I know you've been watching my friend Daisy for the whole night. There's nothing wrong with looking at her, you know. She is a fine-looking girl after all", she tried it with a different approach. "But you're overdoing it. She feels a bit harassed, even threatened by you and that's not okay. I'm sure you mean nothing bad, but just stop it before it gets worse"

The stranger still didn't show any reaction that even acknowledged her presence and finally, Ilish started to feel uneasy around him as well. And she realized that she started to lose her temper with him. If there was one thing Ilish truly hated, it was being ignored. She and Lawsen exchanged a look and her companion shrugged. Finally, Ilish slammed her fist down onto the table. "Alright, stop ignoring me!", she growled. "And even more importantly, stop bothering Daisy. She has it hard enough already from people like you, you understand what I'm saying, you godsdamn creep?"

Finally, she realized that the stranger acknowledged her presence. He audibly held his breath for a moment, still not looking at her. "Kreep?", he asked with a completely monotone voice.

"This is interesting. How do you know my name?" With these words, he finally raised his head and looked at her, even though Ilish immediately wished he wouldn't have done it. "Oh my god!", she exclaimed and finally understood why he hid his face underneath this hat

The stranger's face was horribly disfigured. A part of his lips and his entire left cheek, from the cheekbone down to the chin was missing, as if it had been chewed off or perhaps cut off, exposing his teeth, gum and even part of his bone. The horrible wound was old and the flesh around it was scarred, the skin deathly pale. The remaining part of his face revealed that he was in his late teens at best, but the look in his grey eyes was as dull and dead as someone who had seen too much in his life. Short, dark blonde hair was visible underneath his hat.

"Your... your face...", Ilish stuttered, looking at the stranger completely horrified. "How do you know my name?", he asked again in return, his voice still completely monotone. "Have you talked to the blacksmith's girl?"

Despite the shock she was in, Ilish understood what he said and she did not like it at all. "The blacksmith's girl?", she asked. "You mean Rosalie Mettel? What do you have to do with her?" Ilish didn't know Rosalie Mettel very well. She was one of Daisy's friends, a nice and pleasant, but slightly shallow girl. And the way this man said 'the blacksmith's girl' made her shiver.

"Yes, I have met her a few hours ago. She is very pretty", the Stranger answered, without even the hint of an emotion in his voice. "Tell me, how do you know my name?" Ilish narrowed her eyes in confusion, before she understood what he was saying. "Your name is creep?", she asked and the young man shook his head. "Kreep", he corrected her. "My name is Kreep" Ilish and Lawsen exchanged a confused look and this time, Lawsen shook his head. "Kreep is not a name", he insisted, although he pronounced the word slowly, as if he was talking to an imbecile. Given the disfigured man's flat, monotone way of speaking, Ilish had almost a similar impression, but behind his dull grey eyes, she saw the hint of a frightening intelligence.

"It is my name", Kreep insisted and slowly raised from his chair. "This blacksmith's girl... her name is Rosalie? She called me by it and I decided to keep it. I don't think I have another name. At least I don't remember..." He slowly bowed his head and Ilish was unsure if it was meant as a sign of respect, or as a threatening gesture. "I have no problem with you. I apologize for bothering the pretty barmaid", he said and his voice made it clear that he wasn't sorry at all. Before Ilish could react, Kreep grabbed her by the shoulders, fast enough to cause her to suppress a scream. Lawsen gave her an alarmed look, but before he was able to do anything, Kreep had pushed Ilish to the side, gently, but with a strength that was terrifying, compared to his scrawny body. "I will leave now", he proclaimed. "I have to find my father"

"Your father?", Ilish asked, still baffled by his disfigured looks, his strange way of speaking and his frightening strength. "Who is your father?" Kreep shrugged and for a moment, it looked like the remaining part of his lips formed a gruesome smile. "I don't know. That's why I'm looking for him", he explained as if the question was fully answered that way. Before Ilish could say another thing, he turned around, pulling his hat deeply into his face in the process, and started to walk out of the tavern.

Ilish and Lawsen were only able to look after him for a moment, until Ilish felt the need to say something to end the silence between them. "So, that was...", she started to say, but Lawsen cut her off first. "Creepy?", he asked with a smirk. Ilish raised her eyebrows and shook her head. "Please, don't go there, Lawsen", she mumbled and shook her head. "That was scary" Lawsen gave her a short nod. "I agree", he muttered. "I'm just glad this guy left without causing a big scene. He gave me a bad feeling" Ilish had to gulp as she thought how easily he could

have knocked her out with his strength. "Same here", she agreed. Lawsen slightly chuckled, even though it was a stilted, fake chuckle, barely hiding how worried he was. "So... I was glad to help. I'm going to leave now, going back to my table. If we don't speak to each other again tonight, have a pleasant evening", he said and Ilish gave him a thankful smile.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Daisy slowly approaching. Her friend had a relieved smile on her face as she looked from Ilish to the door the stranger just disappeared from.

"Thank you, Ilish", Daisy said and quickly gave her a short hug. Ilish pressed her lips together, still thinking about what Kleep might have done to her friend if she hadn't intervene. "Have you seen his face?", she asked and Daisy's smile vanished. "Yes", she admitted. "I... I am glad you dealt with him"

She wanted to say something else, but a loud noise cut her off, from behind her, in the middle of the tavern, where the sellswords sat. As Ilish and Daisy turned around, they saw Rodrik, the sellsword knight. He had raised from his chair, his left hand raised, the right hovering above the hilt of his sword, his face reddened with anger. "What have you said, you little bitch?", he growled and then, Ilish saw it. On the ground, holding her cheek, lay Megur, Audrey's daughter and Daisy's cousin. Optically, she looked a lot like Ilish imagined a younger Audrey, with the same vibrant hair, a similarly chubby body and a plump face. She tried to crawl away from the knight, who quickly put one of his boots onto her belly. "You think you can just insult me? I am a knight and you will show respect!"

By now, the talk in the tavern had died down and most of the customers looked at the scenery in surprise, horror and, in some cases, anticipation. Daisy grabbed Ilish by the arm, slowly attempting to pull her towards the knight. "Come on", she urged her. "We have to do something" Ilish slightly shook her head and felt appropriately bad for it. "You see that guy? He's chopping us to pieces if we try anything" Daisy's grip on her shoulder got harder, as the girl looked from Ilish to the knight in horror. "That's my cousin over there", she muttered and Ilish closed her eyes. That was typical for Daisy. Megur wasn't exactly the most shining example of a good cousin and if their roles would be reversed, she wouldn't think about intervening, but Daisy was the complete opposite. She had to help, even if it was dangerous to provoke this knight any more and even if there was little both of them could do against a man as tall as Rodrik.

Before Ilish even had to hold her friend back, someone else thankfully intervened. A tall man, at least as tall as the knight, with bright red hair and a long, bushy beard, raised from his chair near the counter. Ilish had seen him earlier, first talking to the chubby man with the moustache and Alan Harking, later talking to the beautiful lady in red. He was the only one to intervene and the only one who looked strong enough to intervene at the same time. "Now, what is the meaning of this?", he growled. "That's not how you treat a lady"

Ser Rodrik focussed his gaze on the red-haired man, his hand slowly grabbing the hilt of his sword. It was Valyrian Steel, she had no doubt about it. Normal steel wasn't supposed to be that dark and to shimmer at the same time. And there was a ruby in its pommel, shaped like a heart and big enough to be worth more than the whole inn. Before the red-haired man could do anything, Rodrik had drawn his sword and pointed it directly at his throat, the edge of the blade painfully close to cut it. "None of your business", he answered. "The bitch insulted me" "Because you're too stingy to pay, prick!", Megur spat from the ground and earned herself a kick in the side. "Rodrik", one of the sellswords behind him said. Ilish recognized him as Alexander, the man she had talked to earlier. He looked genuinely concerned and a bit shocked at the knight's actions. "Rodrik, don't provoke a fight, please. Look around, there are far too many..." The knight cut him off by slamming his left elbow into his face. Alexander stumbled backwards, holding his nose, as blood flew out from between his hands. He slowly sank to the ground, just as Rodrik slowly lowered his sword, releasing the red-haired man. Apparently he indeed realized how many people he would be up against if he would start a fight. "You want to get paid, huh?", he snarled at Megur, before he sheathed his sword and reached for his purse. No one said a word as he grabbed a handful of silver coins and let them fall down onto Megur's head. The girl cringed back as good as possible as she was hit by the hard coins and the knight turned around.

"Second Sons!", he exclaimed. "We're leaving. It's going to be a busy night" While his men raised from their chairs and grabbed their weapons, he looked down onto the bleeding Alexander. "You're coming?", he asked and the sellsword looked up. "You fucking broke my nose Rodrik!", he muttered. Instead of answering, the knight stepped past him. "I'm taking that as a 'No'", he growled and walked out, leaving Alexander behind.

Daisy and Ilish ran over to Megur and while Daisy helped her cousin up, Ilish looked at Alexander, letting out a sigh, before finally extending a hand to help him up. "I can do it alone", Megur hissed and slapped Daisy's hand away as she got up, quickly collecting Rodrik's silver coins. With a forced smile on her face, she looked at the red-haired man, who was slightly holding his throat. Rodrik's sword had barely grazed it, although it was clear that it could have easily been worse. "Thank you", Megur chirped, as she walked past him, towards her mother. "He nearly killed me", the red-haired man mumbled, without even looking at her. "Nearly killed me just for intervening"

"Yeah, that's Rodrik for you", Alexander said, while Ilish helped him up. He gave her a thankful smile. "Ser Rodrik Stone, also known as 'The Kinslayer', a wanted man in the Kingdom of the Mountain and Vale. He killed men for less", he continued, as he sat down on a chair. "You see, my earlier warning has not been misplaced. It was genuine concern. Letting him wait was not a good idea, because now he is in a murderous mood"

Even though she had no real reason to do it, Ilish reached into her pocket, giving Alexander a small linen for his bleeding nose. He gave her another thankful smile, as he pressed the linen against his nose. "I had to help my friend", Ilish insisted. "I couldn't know he would outright try to kill someone"

"Rodrik lives for bloodshed and brutality. He is absolutely ruthless", Alexander explained. "He even killed his own father, the old Lord Corbray out of pure spite" Ilish sat down next to him, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "So, how did you end up working for a man like him?", she asked. "You don't seem that bad"

Alexander chuckled at these words. "Out of habit", he answered. "I lived in Slaver's Bay for most of my life, the only son of exiled Volantene merchants. Befriended the wrong people in my early teens. I got into some fights and noticed that I had a talent. Because of that, I finally joined the Second Sons, back when Rodrik was still an ordinary member of them"

Ilish gave him a nod. "Yeah. I know stories like that. And suddenly, you find yourself working in a job you hate, for a man you despise, but strangely unwilling to just quit", she mumbled. "My father had the same problem and I like to imagine that my brother has it at the moment" She avoided eye contact for a moment as she had to remember Carvin. "So, why are the Second Sons in Westeros?", she asked to fill the uncomfortable silence.

"To explain that, I have to speak verbosely. Four banners, among it the one Rodrik is currently leading, got hired by some bloodthirsty bastard who fights in the contested lands in the old kingdom of Sarnor" His voice got a slightly bitter tone as he continued. "Nain Anturion", he mumbled. "One of the worst monsters I ever had the questionable honour of serving under. He and Rodrik got along well, very well actually. They had a similar interest in killing people and in less than two years, Rodrik managed to achieve command over a full banner"

"So, you have a history of working for assholes?", Ilish asked and Alexander smirked slightly. "Looks like it, right?", he chuckled. "I mean, my work has never been that bad. I mostly had to stand guard somewhere and occasionally I had to fight against someone, but it could have been worse"

"You haven't answered my question", Ilish remarked and Alexander gave her a nod. "You are right, of course. While Nain has hired the whole company, he chose one of the best banners, Rodrik's to be precise, to travel to Westeros, to help his brother out with his own plan. Edward Anturion is a complete bastard, but compared to Nain, he is a saint. Nain is someone who slaughters villages for fun, while Edward is nothing more than a high-ranking and immensely ambitious captain in the court of Aeron Blacksails, the pirate king. Ruthless, but reasonable"

"You mean, Rodrik is only a henchman in whatever plan he is following here?", Ilish asked. Alexander shrugged, apparently thinking for a moment. "I don't know that much about it. Rodrik

is searching for something, but he rarely shares any details about his plans with us", he explained. "I know, it can't be good for your city, or else Anturion would be here personally" Ilish narrowed her eyes as she looked around. The red-haired man was gone, now talking to the lady in the red dress. Megur was talking to Audrey, quite loudly, while Daisy continued to serve the few guests who hadn't left already. No one was listening to them. "So, why are you telling me all of this? I doubt Rodrik would approve", she hissed.

"I doubt Rodrik will ever know, unless you plan to tell him", Alexander answered. "Aside from that, at the moment I couldn't care less for what Rodrik would approve of" He slightly touched his bleeding nose and shivered from the pain. "That bastard went too far"

Ilish slowly nodded in agreement. "I guess he did. What are your plans now?", she asked.

Alexander sighed. "Waiting for Rodrik to return. I have no idea where he is going, but I think he'll come back to get me later. The only good quality about Rodrik is his loyalty to his men. No matter how rough he treats them, he leaves no one behind. Until then, I can only wait"

"Alright", Ilish said, giving him the hint of a smile. "You're not that bad, Alexander. Was nice talking to you" She raised from her chair, noting the hint of disappointment on the man's face.

"You're leaving me already?", he asked with a smirk. "We just start to know each other" This forced a slight chuckle out of Ilish's throat. "And I'm afraid we won't get to know each other any better", she answered. "Because my shift is over. I'm going home" She slightly bowed her head and he reciprocated the gesture, before she turned around, walking towards Audrey and Megur. The innkeeper and her daughter saw her coming and stopped their talk. Audrey had a warm smile on her face, while Megur looked less pleased to see her. "Ilish, my dear!", Audrey greeted her. "You did good today, with this strange man. Daisy told me" Megur frowned and Audrey's smile vanished. "I am glad you left the intervening to Marak here", she continued and looked at the red-haired man near the counter.

"You want another free ale, Marak?", she asked. Marak interrupted his talk with the lady in red and a wide grin formed on his face. The woman frowned as he turned away from her and quickly put one of her hands onto his forearm. "He had enough", she said sharply and Marak's grin vanished. "I had enough", he repeated with annoyance.

"Today was surely a busy day", Ilish answered. "But it looks like you can handle it from here. It's already late. Would it be fine if I leave now?" Megur pressed her lips together and shook her head, but Audrey gave her a nod. "Of course, dear", she said. "You did enough today. Get some sleep, I see you tomorrow"

Ilish gave her a thankful smile, before turning towards the tavern's small side entrance. Audrey was right. She really needed some sleep. It wasn't only Alan Harking's neverending and obnoxious flirting she had to endure the whole day, or the encounter with Kreep, or the stressful situation with Rodrik. No, what truly tired her was the talk with Alexander. Sure, he wasn't too

bad, even a bit charming, as she had to admit, but the things he said... As she walked down the dark street, Ilish was worried.

Back when her old life in the North ended, she had felt similarly worried. But over the past five years, she had built herself a new existence here. Raylansfair was her life now. Audrey and Daisy, even Megur. What Alexander said implied a threat to Raylansfair. Ilish wasn't afraid for herself, but for her friends, for her new family.

The distant sound of footsteps cut her thought off and she looked over her shoulder. Nothing, just the darkness. She gulped, before slowly continuing the way to her small house at a steady speed. It was nothing, right? Just her tired mind playing tricks on her. But still... she could swear that there was something, or better, someone, somewhere behind here.

Finally, she heard the sound again, clearly footsteps. She stopped again and turned around, this time clearly hearing the sound of someone running towards her. "Who's there?", she asked loudly and to her surprise, she even got an answer. "It's me!", a slightly familiar voice called her. "Alexander Botwerys"

Indeed, the tall figure of Alexander appeared out of the dark. He was out of breath, clearly he had been running after her for a while now. As he had reached her, he stopped, putting his hands onto his upper legs, breathing heavily. "Just... give me a moment", he gasped, while Ilish gave him a righteously confused look. "Alexander?", she asked. "What the hell are you doing? Did you just ran after me?"

He gave her a short nod. "There is something...", he gasped. "Something I haven't realized at first. Something that might be important to you, Ilish Granver. I'm going to ask you a strange question now, but are you, by any chance, related to Carvin Granver?"

The mention of her brother caught Ilish off guard. Her eyes widened as she took a step closer towards Alexander. "You know my brother?", she asked weakly. Carvin... it almost hurt to think about him. For the past five years, her brother had been as good as dead for her. After what he did... he not only destroyed his life, but hers as well.

Alexander gave her a nod, quickly regaining his breath. "I am sorry for chasing after you like a madman, but I just had to ask this", he apologized. "Would you mind if I walk with you, for a while?" Ilish shook her head, noticing that she was slightly smirking at his words. "Not at all", she answered.

The two continued to walk through the night, closely together, as Alexander began to speak. "I feel a bit foolish for not realizing it earlier", he chuckled. "Aside from your surname... you mentioned a brother and Carvin, he never stopped talking about his little sister"

"He was talking about me?", Ilish asked in surprise. "I thought he never wanted to see me again" Alexander's smile got decidedly warmer, as he shook his head. "Quite the contrary, dear Ilish.

He is afraid that you don't wish to see him", he explained and his smile got weaker as he noticed the cold look on Ilish's face. "You really don't want to see him again?", he asked.

Ilish let out a sigh. "It's not that easy, Alexander", she answered. "How much do you know about my brother?" She avoided his stare, instead focussing on her feet. Carvin was alive... Ilish felt overjoyed, but at the same time, she felt old anger to resurface. "I know he is a good man", Alexander answered. "One of the finest in my banner, once you get to know him better" His words caused Ilish to shake her head. "Perhaps we're talking about two different Carvin Granvers here. My brother... he's anything but a good man", she mumbled. "He's inconsiderate. Ruthless. Vengeful" She paused and closed her eyes. "Can't blame him for that last one, actually. In his position, I would have done the same"

"What are you talking about?", Alexander asked with genuine interest in his voice. "It's about our father", Ilish answered. "Our mother died a few years after my birth, during the winter. Her death changed father, but it also changed Carvin. Father started to drink a lot and he started to gamble. He was a crappy father, but the only one we had. When he couldn't repay his gambling debts, the trouble started" She cut herself off, before the really bad memories resurfaced. First, they broke his fingers, she remembered. A week later, they slaughtered the cattle. When he still couldn't pay, they lit the barn on fire. And then... "The people he owed money to, they killed him", she muttered. "Carvin lost control. He took a sword and he killed them all. The last one... he made him scream"

"Sounds like something I would have done myself. Are you so resentful towards him just because he avenged your father? I doubt these people would have stopped with him", Alexander remarked and Ilish gave him a nod. "I know, they wouldn't have stopped with him. They would have continued to terrorize me and Carvin until we're either dead, or they got their money. I don't blame him for killing them, not even for how he killed them. I blame him for what happened later"

Alexander noticed the hurt expression on her face and calmly put an arm around her shoulder, gently comforting her. Ilish was surprised by the gesture, but too tired to refuse it. "He left me", she mumbled. "He was all the family I had left and he left me. I know, the men he killed had important friends, who would have tried to hunt him down, unless he would leave the kingdom, better yet, the whole continent"

"Which worked out", Alexander remarked. She nodded shortly. "I suppose it did. But I... I wanted to come with him, you know. And he refused, in the most cruel way ever. We travelled together to White Harbour. At night, he just grabbed his horse and most of our stuff, leaving me with barely enough money to travel out of the North", she explained. "Left me only a note that he never wishes to see me again"

She paused, suspecting that Alexander would say something, but to her surprise, he stayed silent as well. Finally, he broke the silence after a long moment. "I am sure he had his reasons. Essos would have destroyed you", he mumbled and Ilish finally pulled away from his grip. "I don't care for his reasons!", she snapped. "I don't care how dangerous Essos would have been for me. He had no right to make this choice for me!"

"Your brother loves you Ilish", Alexander said softly. "And it is clear that you love him as well, or else you wouldn't be that hurt over him leaving you. The way he talks about you... you should hear him. Carvin loves you"

Ilish shook her head insecurely, before a thought crossed her mind. "Is he...", she mumbled. "Is he with you?" She was half relieved and half disappointed when Alexander shook his head. "He is part of my banner, but Rodrik appointed him as Edward's personal bodyguard. They are currently somewhere in the Riverlands, from what I have heard", he answered, before he gave her a soft smile. "I am sorry. I know you must be disappointed by this answer"

"So... what now", Ilish asked, pressing her lips together to hide how upset she was at these memories. Alexander smirked at her. "I only wanted to ask about your connection to Carvin. Unless you have any more questions, I suppose...", he started to say, before he cut himself off. "Quiet", he hissed and pointed down the street. "We are not alone..."

Both of them stopped and Ilish started to listen. At first, she heard nothing. Then, the hint of raspy breaths and soft footsteps. Finally, she saw a scrawny figure in the darkness, slowly coming closer. She noticed that Alexander narrowed his eyes and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Who is this...", he mumbled, putting his second hand on the hilt of a long dagger on his belt. "Who walks there?", he shouted.

Finally, the figure stepped into the moonlight, revealing a large hat, underneath it the scarred, mutilated face of Kleep. For the first time, Ilish noticed the razor sharp blades that were dangling on his belt. She gulped, damning herself for not taking a knife with her. "What the hell?", Alexander mumbled, widely opening his eyes as he looked at Kleep's face. Finally, he drew his longsword and the dagger, pointing both at the young man. "Stay back!", he shouted and to Ilish's surprise, Kleep followed the order.

"Good evening", he greeted them in his unnervingly emotionless voice. "Could you not point these blades at me? I am not here for either of you" Ilish and Alexander exchanged a glance and the sellsword kept his blade raised and pointed at Kleep. "Then why are you following us?" For the first time, she saw emotion on Kleep's face. The remains of his lips formed a terrifying smile, even though his eyes looked slightly confused. "I am not following you", he answered and pointed at Ilish. No... with terror, she realized that he was pointing at something behind her. "I followed him"

Ilish twirled around, looking at a second figure that was illuminated by the moonlight. A thin body underneath a long, brown overcoat, bedraggled blonde hair, a scarred, pale face, light grey eyes, one of them blinded by a fresh wound and worst of all, a sickening grin on his face. "Hello Katya", Wolfius Woodbark greeted her, revealing the long dagger he was holding in his hand. Katya? Ilish let out a sigh. Oh, Seven Hells, he still had no idea... "My name is Ilish", she answered with shaking voice, to hide her fear. She had heard the stories, had heard what this man did. "Why are you here? What do you want from me?", she asked, even if she already knew the answer. Wolfius grin got a bit wider. "Ilish? But Katya is such a pretty name", he chuckled, before his voice gained sharpness. "Can't you guess why I am here, whore?" "Stay back!", Alexander growled, pointing the longsword at Wolfius and the dagger at Kreep. "Both of you!" Wolfius chuckled, finally looking at Alexander. "What do you want to do against me, huh?", he asked. Alexander pointed the blade slightly higher, right between Wolfius' eyes. "For starters, I'm going to stab you if you come another step closer" Wolfius shook his head. "I have no problem with you. You may leave if you...", he started to say, before he looked over Alexander's shoulder. "Seven Hells, your face is fucked up!", he remarked as he looked at Kreep. "Why... why are you smiling?" Finally Ilish realized that Kreep was openly smiling now, an effect that was made even more gruesome by his missing cheek. "I have found you", the young man exclaimed. "I have found you... father" For a moment, Wolfius' surprised facial expression matched Ilish's. "Father?", both of them exclaimed almost simultaneously. Wolfius regained his composure a bit quicker. "This is absurd. I don't know what you are, but I have only one son and you look nothing like him", he growled. "So, if you don't want to die alongside her, leave me alone" Kreep slowly shook his head. "I know, you are my father. I feel it. I have felt your presence ever since I arrived here. And you have felt mine", he answered. "Look me in the eyes, father and you will see it. I am like you" Ilish and Wolfius both looked at Kreep's pale grey eyes, the same colour Wolfius' remaining eye had. But Wolfius apparently saw something more in them. "I have a son", he mumbled in disbelief, before a howling laugh forced his way out of his throat. "I have a son and he is just like me!", he yelled in triumph. "You are the one whose presence I felt! The one that is going to help me!" His triumphant howl stopped, as he pointed his knife at Alexander. "Wait a moment...", he mumbled. "I think I know why I never knew anything about you..." He looked at Kreep, still amazed, but also violently angry. "You were supposed to be dead! He told me you died at birth!", he shouted. "This bastard... If I ever get near him again, I will cut his lying little eyes out!" He looked back at Kreep, his dagger still pointing at Alexander. "You're going to help me, first in this city and later when I get my vengeance!", he barked.

Kreep quickly gave him a nod. "I will, father!", he promised. "Whatever you want to do, father" Wolfius gave him a nod, but before he was able to say anything, Alexander took a swing at him, forcing him to jump back to evade the blade. "So, you both want to die?", the sellsword asked. Wolfius shook his head. "I could ask you the same thing", he growled and looked back at Kreep. "Son, do me a favour and... what's your name, by the way?"

"I am Kreep, father", Kreep answered and did not react when Wolfius gave him a confused grin. "Kreep? Kreep is not a name, boy. What kind of parent names their kid...", he said, before cutting himself off. "Oh... oh, of course... Well, *Kreep*, do me a favour and get the girl for me. Don't kill her, just knock her out. She's mine" He tried to stab Alexander, who parried the dagger with his longsword. "I'll be with her in a minute", Wolfius growled. "First I got to dispose of this little rat"

Alexander looked over his shoulders and gave Ilish a worried look. Before she could even react, Kreep had already grabbed her and heavily threw her onto the ground. Her vision blurred for a short moment as she hit her head, but her senses returned immediately as Kreep jumped on top of her with brutal strength, holding her hands down. "Don't resist!", he ordered her, his voice sounding almost like Wolfius' for a moment. "It gets more painful if you resist"

Out of the corner of her eyes, Ilish saw Alexander trying to hit Wolfius, who managed to evade the sellsword's attack with surprising speed and grace. On the other hand, Alexander proved himself to be a good fighter, blocking Wolfius' rapid counterattacks with ease. Ilish tried to move her own hands upwards to punch Kreep in the face, only to realize how much stronger he was than her. His grip on her wrists got stronger and he didn't even flinch as she raised her knee to kick him in the stomach. "I warned you", he growled, letting go of her right wrist for a moment. Before Ilish was able to punch him with her newly free hand, Kreep gave her a heavy punch in the face, causing her to nearly lose her consciousness. "I warned you", he repeated and punched her again, this time hitting her cheek. "I warned you"

"Ilish!", she heard Alexander shouting and as she slightly turned her head, she saw him attempting to attack Kreep. Wolfius used this moment to dart forwards, trying to impale his opponent. In the last moment, Alexander managed to parry the attack, but only by moving his left arm between the blade and his chest. The knife pierced his sleeve and the flesh underneath it, causing him to cry out in pain and to drop his dagger.

"Big mistake, man", Wolfius chuckled and viciously continued his attack, forcing Alexander into the defensive, as he barely managed to parry the madman's attack with his sword. Kreep let out a hissing sound as he raised his closed fist again. And Ilish closed her eyes...

...only to open them again as she felt the grip on her wrists to disappear, as Kreep let out a surprised grunt and made a jump backwards, off of her. She immediately crawled backwards, away from him, as he focussed his gaze on a new figure who had just entered the alleyway, a

longsword in hand. It took Ilish a moment to recognize Lawsen, whose determined and angry facial expression was a stark contrast to his usual friendly smile. "Get away from her", he growled and for a moment, Kreep looked surprised. He quickly regained his composure and put his hands on the hilt of his daggers.

"Lawsen?", Ilish mumbled in surprise, her head still hurting and her vision still blurred from Kreep's punch. He gave her a nod, followed by a slight smile. "I saw this bastard following you and I knew, I had to do something", he said. "Glad I managed to be here in time" Ilish groaned in pain as she got back on her knees. "Where do you got that sword?", she asked, but Lawsen didn't manage to answer immediately, as Kreep let out an animalistic howl, before he started to charge at him, attacking him with both daggers simultaneously.

"Told you not to judge a book by it's cover!", Lawsen shouted as he managed to parry the strike. It looked less skilled than Alexander's attacks, but Kreep wasn't a particularly skilled fighter either. On the downside, Wolfius' son was unbelievably fast, quickly attacking Lawsen over and over, slowly forcing him to go backwards again.

"Ilish, now's your chance!", she heard Alexander calling, who still fought against Wolfius. "Run! We keep them busy!" With these words he took a counterattack at Wolfius, forcing him to take a jump backwards. However, she also saw that Wolfius' knife had caused a serious wound to his arm. The ground was already stained with his blood, but he kept on fighting with his good arm, relentlessly driving Wolfius backwards. The smirk on the monster's face made it clear that this wasn't entirely unintentional however and Ilish realized that he was only waiting until Alexander made the next mistake.

Still a bit dizzy and with weak knees, she slowly got back on her feet. For a short moment, she looked towards the exit of the alleyway, somewhere behind Lawsen and Kreep. She immediately felt ashamed for this thought. No, Wolfius was here for her. She couldn't live with herself if she would just leave Alexander and Lawsen. While the sellsword had a momentary advantage over Wolfius, Lawsen's fight against Kreep looked less good. He was bleeding from a small cut on his chest and only barely managed to dodge an attack that would have nearly slashed his throat, while having almost no time to make a counterattack. Ilish knew, she had to help one of them, perhaps even both!

She quickly looked around and spotted Alexander's dagger still lying on the ground where he dropped it. Ilish wasn't a fighter, but she came from the North. She knew how to pull her weight in a fight, even if the dagger was almost too long for her liking. With shaking hands, she grabbed it, looking at the two fights. On her left, Alexander finally managed to force Wolfius to parry his attacks, even if his wounded arm clearly caused him pain and made him reckless. To her right, Kreep had succeeded in giving Lawsen a second, painful-looking cut across the chest.

He wasn't paying any attention to her at the moment. Ilish gulped, knowing that she had to make a decision, whom she wanted to help first.

[Help Lawsen and fight against Kleep]

John

"Perhaps we should have waited until tomorrow", Janae remarked, letting out a loud yawn as she walked next to John through the nightly Reach. About an hour ago, they had left the walls of Raylansfair behind. Currently, they were walking through a small coastal forest, the path in front of them only dimly illuminated by a storm lantern.

"Just try to relax, Janae", John said, in a surprisingly good mood. The cold autumn night made him feel alive, more than anything else in the past two weeks. He had a task and for the first time since Cass died, it felt easy to concentrate on something, to simply suppress all the bad thoughts for once. Deep down, John Gutten knew, it couldn't stay like this for long, but for now, he wanted to enjoy the moment. "There's no one here. Just you and me", he continued with a grin, to which Janae answered with a frown. "Come on, don't be like that", John chuckled. "A good old-fashioned treasure hunt. For once, we don't have to fight for our lives to earn some money"

Janae gave him a reluctant nod. "You're right with that", she admitted and let out a sigh. "It's just that I don't trust this lord. He gives me a bad feeling" She looked around, as if she expected someone to spy on them. "Doesn't matter", John answered. "Money is money. As long as we get paid, I couldn't care less for whatever shady scheme he pursues"

"Usually, I'd agree with you", Janae answered. "But I mean, he gives me a really bad feeling. The last time I had this feeling was in Tolos, the job with the merchant" Gutten gulped as he remembered what she talked about. Back then, their employer refused to pay them and lured them into an ambush. It ended with three of Gutten's men dead, surrounded by the merchant and a dozen of his guards. "That bad, huh...", he mumbled, trying his best to keep his previously good mood. But her frown was contagious.

"I mean, their previous lord died under shady circumstances and you have seen the castle. Not exactly impressive. It's not too far fetched to assume that he plans to double cross us", Janae explained and Gutten had to agree with her. "So, what do you suggest? Not working for him?", he asked, mildly annoyed that his good mood was all but gone in a matter of seconds. As always, Janae realized how he felt. A rare, warm smile appeared on her face. "Look, I still enjoy

this", she said "It's a pleasant night, just for you and me. I guess I'm just not used to a job like this anymore. It sounds almost too good to be true"

Gutten gave her a nod, but his frown remained. Now that his bad mood had returned, so did the memories of Cass. And in the darkness and silence, it was worse than ever. Her death had been his fault. And this was the worst, the knowledge that it could have been different if he wouldn't have ordered Janae to shoot Bear. In a matter of seconds, his good mood was replaced by grumpy brooding and he knew, Janae felt it.

"John...", she mumbled, obviously upset that she caused some bad memories to resurface. Another rare expression, a hopeful smile, appeared on her face as she slightly nudged his shoulder. "Hey John, why don't you tell me about this crazy job in Norvos again?", she asked and against his will, the hint of a smile forced its way onto Gutten's face. By the gods, this woman knew how to cheer him up!

"You mean the part where I seduced that noblewoman? Or the part where I burned down her mansion? Or the part where me and Tem had to escape from the whorehouse, with nothing but a single life goat to cover our private parts?", he said and a small chuckle was heard from Janae. "Sadly, I remember that one all too well and I always found it to be the least impressive part of the story", she said with a mocking tone. "But I'd love to hear it again"

John let out a sigh as he finally realized what she was doing. He gave her a genuine, heartfelt smile and even though she did not smile back, the look in her eyes meant the world to him.

"Sometimes, I wonder where I would be without you", he remarked and Janae slightly shrugged. "Dead of course", she answered firmly. This time, Gutten shook his head. "I think I'd be worse", he answered. "I'd be one of these ruthless cutthroat sellswords"

"But John, you are a ruthless cutthroat sellsword", Janae answered quickly and John had to laugh at this. "I am serious right now. Can't believe that you're the one cracking a joke this time", he remarked. "Felt like you could need a joke", Janae explained and this time she smiled back at him. "Besides, I'm not exactly keeping your moral compass intact. You got Hara for that"

"No, I mean, as long as you're with me, I know that I have someone to fight for, someone who would always have my back", John explained, before he gave her a serious look. "You are my best friend, you know that, don't you?" He and Janae looked at each other, before the woman let out a sigh. "I swear to every god that's willing to listen, if you start to sing 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair' now..."

"It's true", John insisted, focussing on the road in front of him. "I don't say it very often, but I would be nothing without you. Now, there's only you and me out here and I feel like thanking you, for always having my back. For understanding me" He looked back at Janae, who had a smile on her face. As soon as she noticed that he watched her, her usual frown returned. "You're

getting old and sentimental, my bear", she muttered. "I mean... what I want to say is, I know. You claim to be nothing without me, but what would I be without you?"

"Dead most likely", John answered and Janae gave him a sullen nod. "True", she simply mumbled. Both walked in silence after this comment, but John appreciated her company more than ever. For over ten years now she had been his best friend and he knew, Janae felt similarly, even if she had trouble expressing it.

"That our tower?", Janae asked and he looked up again, having been lost in thoughts for a moment. The forest had gotten lighter by now and from the sound of the waves, it was obvious that they were near the cliffs. The tower itself was in a better shape than Gutten expected. It stood about a hundred feet in front of them, on a glade, directly atop the cliffs, five stories high, a thin building, reminding him of a lighthouse. Gutten narrowed his eyes as he looked at the building and put a hand on the hilt of his sword as Janae pulled an arrow out of her quiver. A single window in the tower's first floor was illuminated by a candle.

Words weren't needed. Both of them had been in a situation like this countless times, on both sides. Quickly, John extinguished the light of the candle in his storm lantern. Without making a sound, Janae approached the tower, quickly crossing the hundred feet between her and the building. John followed a bit slower, careful not to make any noise. No one was supposed to be here!

They stopped in front of the tower's only door, Janae to its right, Gutten to its left. In other situations, he would have kicked it in immediately, but right now, he knew nothing about the person who had lit the candle. Instead, he simply put a hand on the doorknob, while Janae stood behind him, her bow raised as he opened the door. To his surprise, it was unlocked, even though it squeaked horribly as he pushed it open. Behind them lay a small, dark room, empty, with a ladder leading down into the lower parts of the tower and a staircase that lead up to the higher floors. From above, a surprised gasp was audible, someone quickly standing up and the sound of someone drawing a sword.

Both, Gutten and the stranger, knew that secrecy wouldn't work anymore. But to Gutten's surprise, the stranger decided to talk to them. "Who is there?", he called with a deep, booming voice. "We could ask you the same question", Janae answered. "No one is supposed to be here. I have to warn you, we are armed"

As a response, the stranger started to laugh and from the sound of his footsteps, it became clear that he was approaching the stairway. Janae narrowed her eyes, while John gulped as the man slowly started to walk down the stairs, into their field of view. He was tall, taller than Gutten, close to seven feet. His head was shaved bald and he had the build of a true warrior. Two deep, noticeable scars were spread across his face, one of them on his right cheek, the other starting on the left side of his face, all the way up behind his ear. In his right hand, he wore a large

greatsword, allowing him to wear a sturdy wooden shield with his left. He wasn't wearing armour, but the thick, woolen clothing he was wearing reminded Gutten of the stuff knights wore underneath their armour. "Do you think I fear two opponents?", he growled with an eager voice. Gutten quickly shook his head. "We are not here to look for a fight, Ser...", he started to say, noticing that the man's facial expression showed slight disappointment. "Daghan Oxus", he introduced himself, still keeping his shield up.

John pointed first at himself, then at Janae. "My name is John Gutten, the leader of a small sellsword group. This is my second-in-command Janae", he introduced them, before he glanced at Janae. "Lower your weapon, Janae", he ordered her. "I doubt this man is an enemy" With visible reluctance, Janae followed his order, before Gutten put his sword away too. Finally, Daghan let out a sigh, lowering his shield and sword. "How disappointing", he remarked. "Excuse me, Ser, we have not expected anyone to be here", John explained and Daghan shook his head. "Neither have I", he answered. "What are you two doing here?" Before John could answer, Janae cut him off. "We could ask you the same question", she hissed.

"Can you?", Daghan asked, narrowing his eyes. "Tell me why you are here and I will answer to your questions" Janae shook her head. "None of your...", she started to say, but this time, Gutten cut her off. He knew, honesty wasn't always the best course of action, but this time, he saw no reason to lie to this man, especially since he had no wish to count him to his enemies. Perhaps he could even be helpful in finding the treasure. "We have been hired by Lord Harris Flowers", he revealed and Janae gave him an alarmed stare. "We are treasure hunters, tasked with finding Lord Merrett Raylan's famous treasure"

For a moment, Daghan only looked at them in surprise. Then, he started to laugh, a slightly mocking, but genuine laugh. "Treasure hunters!", he exclaimed. "How much is he paying you to chase after a legend?"

"Enough", Janae hissed with an irritated tone. "We have to look around here" Daghan shook his head. "Well, it is not in the upper floors", he revealed, before he pointed at himself. "Ah, excuse my manners. I haven't introduced myself. My name is Ser Daghan Oxus and I am..." He paused for a moment. "I am a hedge knight"

"A hedge knight", Janae repeated toneless, clearly not believing a word he said. "You claim it is not up there. Would you mind if we take a look around?" Daghan gave her a decisive nod.

"Yeah, I would mind", he snarled. "I currently live up there and don't appreciate strangers meddling with my belongings"

"Sure...", Janae said slowly, before she looked at John, who subtly shook his head. This man was huge and obviously very strong. John himself was still wounded and he wouldn't risk a fight with this man. "We'll stick to the lower floors then", he said and the knight gave him a pleased nod. "One question though... we were told this tower is abandoned. Why are you here?"

Ser Daghan pressed his lips together. It was clear that he was not a skilled liar, but his physique was threatening enough to overplay this weakness. "I am expecting a friend. We were supposed to meet here in two days, but I arrived a bit earlier", he explained.

"A friend...", Janae repeated tonelessly, slightly shaking her head in frustration, before she looked at the ladder that lead downstairs. "I'm checking the basement. You stay up here with your new *hedge knight* friend" She quickly lit a torch and approached the ladder, while John gave her the hint of a smile, before she climbed down, leaving him alone with Ser Daghan.

"You see anything?", Gutten called after a while. "Nothing", Janae answered immediately. "Just a single, empty room... I'm going to look around with a shovel, just keep an eye on that asshole up there" Daghan raised his eyebrows, even though he smirked while doing it. "Looks like she does not like me", he remarked.

"Can you blame her?", Gutten asked. "She does not like being lied to" Immediately, before Daghan could answer anything, he raised his hands. "I on the other hand have no problem with you not telling us the truth about you. Your business is your business and as long as you don't get in our way, we won't get in yours"

This seemed to impress the self-proclaimed hedge knight and he looked pleased as he answered. "I am glad we understand each other, Gutten", he answered. "I guess I have to apologize for threatening you earlier. One can never be too careful these days" John slowly nodded in agreement. "True", he mumbled. "And we never intended to fight you. No one would have won in a fight between us"

A grim smile appeared on Daghan's face, as he shook his head. "I disagree. You two look like capable warriors. It would have been a glorious fight and I would have won with pleasure", he answered and his smile got wider for a moment. "However, it also appears to me that you are no bad people. If I would have fought you with sharp weapons, I would have killed you. That would have been a shame"

Gutten had to chuckle at this remark and he decidedly shook his head. "How can you be so sure that you would have killed us? I bet I have at least as much fighting experience as you have", he answered. Daghan gave him a nod. "That could be true. But these wounds on your face, they are two weeks old at best. And the way you stand... your ribs are damaged, right?", he explained.

Before John could answer, a surprised scream from the cellar caused both him and Daghan to look up. "Janae!", Gutten exclaimed as he rushed to the ladder, leaving the knight alone upstairs. "Janae, what happened?" He nearly jumped down the ladder and it took him only seconds until he arrived down there. It would have been pitch black in the room if it wasn't for Janae's torch lying on the ground. It wasn't very big, had no further doors and no furniture at all. Next to the

torch, a hole in the ground was visible and Gutten immediately rushed towards it. "Is everything alright, Gutten?", he heard Daghan's voice from upstairs. "I don't know!", he answered. "Janae!" "I'm down here", he thankfully heard her muffled voice coming out of the hole. Before he came closer, Daghan's voice sounded from upstairs. "Gutten, do you have more men with you?", the knight asked and Gutten looked up. "What?", he asked alarmed and heard Daghan sighing. "I suppose that's a 'No'", he growled. "This is not good... get your friend up here. We got company!"

He didn't need to repeat his order. Immediately, Gutten rushed towards the hole. He grabbed the torch and looked down. Roughly ten feet below him, he saw Janae on her knees. She looked up to him, more surprised than actually hurt. "I'm fine", she reassured him. "The ground gave in, be careful!" She narrowed her eyes as she looked around. "This looks like a room and...", she started to say, before she cut herself off. "John, hold the torch directly above the hole" Her voice sounded nervous. As soon as he held the torch right above the hole, he heard a suppressed curse in her Ghiscari mother tongue. "Get that torch away, by the gods, or we're all dead!"

"Janae, what is down there?", Gutten asked, as he immediately put the torch away from the hole. She did not answer. Instead, she looked up and raised her hand. "Help me up and I'll show you", she answered. He lowered his arm to pull her up. Under other circumstances, he would have done so without effort, but now, even someone as light as Janae caused his ribs to ache. Eventually, he managed to pull her up, noticing that she only held onto his arm with one hand. In the other, she held a tiny object.

"That's the smallest of them", she answered and Gutten saw the shock on her face. "John, I think we found the treasure" She opened her hand and it took John a moment to realize what she was holding. His eyes widened as he looked at the tiny flask filled with a green liquid. From his time in Qohor, Gutten knew exactly how Wildfire looked.

"This is not a treasure. It's a weapon", he mumbled and Janae gave him a nod. "There are thousands of flasks down there, enough wildfire to burn Raylansfair to the ground twice", she remarked "I doubt Lord Harris expected this..."

"Gutten! Janae!", Daghan's voice sounded from upstairs. "We have a problem!" John and Janae looked at each other, before she carefully put down the flask. "Let's get up there and see what he wants", she decided, still shaken by what she had seen down there. Gutten gave her a nod and together, they approached the ladder. "Is it 'We' already, Ser Daghan?", Janae asked as she climbed the ladder. "Indeed it is", the knight answered. "Because we're in this tower, while they are not"

As soon as Gutten finished climbing the ladder, he was greeted by a surprising sight. Daghan had used the time to don his fine, heavily plated armour, coloured entirely in black and red. His

shield was leaning against the wall next to him and he was holding his sword with one hand, using the other to put on his helmet, shaped like a bull. "Interesting choice of colour", Janae remarked. "Isn't it?", Daghan answered and pointed at a small window. "Look", he ordered and Gutten followed.

Outside of the tower, he saw at least a dozen men and women, slowly approaching the building. They were armed, each of them wearing a tabard with an all-too-familiar sigil on them. "What are the fucking Second Sons doing here?", Janae asked, as she eyed a man who had to be the leader. He was tall, wearing a heavy armour and the Second Sons tabard. His head was shaved bald, save for a bushy, brown beard. But what really made him stand out was his sword. John recognized Valyrian Steel when he saw it

"Greetings!", he yelled at the top of his lungs. "I know you're in there! My name is Ser Rodrik Stone, Captain of the Second Sons. Come out with sheathed weapons and you'll be allowed to leave unharmed! Refuse this order and we will kill you!"

Daghan let out a thundering laugh. "Looks like I get my fight after all!", he exclaimed. "I counted them, they are only a dozen. And they all need to get through this tiny door. We can get them!"

Janae gave him an alarmed stare. "You mean to fight?", she asked and Daghan gave her a nod.

"What other choice do we have? Surrender? I can't leave this tower for now and I am sure you're not going to give up on your legendary treasure", he answered. Janae shook her head.

"No, I don't intend to surrender", she mumbled, before a cold, pragmatic smile appeared on her face. "But perhaps we can end this quickly. John, there are thousands of flasks down there. Lord Harris won't even notice one or two missing. Surely you don't mean to surrender, to give the Second Sons such a weapon!"

No, giving up was no option, right? Gutten had never trusted the Second Sons. But if he would fight, there would be a strong chance that he or Janae would die. Was protecting this weapon from the Second Sons worth it? Of course, he could always use the Wildfire on them, Janae was right. But he knew how volatile, how dangerous it was, even for those who tried to use it. By the Drowned God, he had to make a decision!

[Refuse to surrender and use the Wildfire on them]

Alys

"I can't take him anymore", Alys hissed, glancing at Harren Hoare. The king had a cruel grin on his face as he looked at two of his thralls, who slowly started to carry out the body of the poor farmhand he just murdered. The lords of the Iron Islands had a rather amused look on their face, or at the very least, indifferent to their king's brutality, while the Riverlords looked intimidated, meek, spineless.

Edward gave her a worried look, but said nothing as she closely followed Carvin, who shouldered his way through the crowd. Hostile glares hit her whenever Carvin had to push someone aside, but thankfully, no one tried to stop them. Even though she knew it was only her anxiety, she could swear that she could feel Harren Hoare's glare.

Only as she finally stepped out of the Great Hall, she realized that she had almost held her breath during the past minute. Gasping for air, she allowed a fresh cold breeze into her lung. Carvin gave her a look that was somewhere between affability and indifference, before he looked around across the courtyard. "Now, where is he?", he mumbled, wordlessly commanding Alys to follow.

"Hey there!", a young, male voice called out and as Carvin and Alys turned around, they saw the young, lanky man that had been in Harlan Hoare's group, the one Carvin had a score to settle with. He was holding a longbow in each hand and Carvin smirked as he saw him. "Hjalgar!", he greeted him. "Are you ready to get humiliated?" He looked past him and Alys saw that the other men from Harlan's group were with him. "And I see you even brought some friends. You are really eager to let everyone see what a bad archer you are"

"That remains to be seen", Hjalgar mumbled humbly, before raising one of the longbows he was holding. "I suppose, the longbow is to your satisfaction?" With these words, he threw one of the bows towards Carvin, who quickly caught it. "I prefer the crossbow, but I guess you're too weak to cock it", he answered in a mocking tone. Hjalgar shook his head. "Not at all", he claimed. "It's just that shooting something with a crossbow lacks skill. It's loud and crude"

Carvin pressed his lips together, obviously upset at these words, before he pointed at Alys.

"May I introduce my lovely companion, Lady Alys of House Boleyn. You have already met, if I'm not mistaken", he growled. At least Hjalgar had the decency to look ashamed. "We met briefly, yesterday evening", he mumbled, before he looked at his companions. "These are Torvin Breaker and Gabin Strad"

Gabin looked similarly ashamed to meet Alys again, barely looking up, but Torvin, the bearded man, he looked her straight in the eye and she had to be the first to look away. Was it regret she saw in his eyes, or something else?

"So, we build a little target over there", Hjalgar explained, pointing at Harrenhal's western wall.

"Five shots each of us. Winner takes..." He paused for a moment. "We haven't really talked about that one, have we?", he mumbled. "If you win, you'll get my bow" Carvin raised an eyebrow, before he chuckled. "I have little use for a bow, but so be it. I suppose you want my crossbow in the unlikely case of your victory?", he answered.

Hjalgar shook his head. "As I said, I hate crossbows", he mumbled. "How about that ring on your finger? It looks pretty valuable" Carvin narrowed his eyes, decidedly shaking his head. "No", he

simply hissed, signaling that he wouldn't discuss this further. "Take my crossbow or leave it, but you won't get this ring"

With these words, he started to walk towards the western wall and Alys saw that he was absent-mindedly moving his finger across the plain, brazen ring on his left, slightly smiling while he did so. She fastened her steps to catch up to him, giving him a curious look. "Where is the woman who gave you this?", she asked, as it was obvious how much it meant to him. He looked up, slightly surprised for a moment, before he shook his head. "Oh, it wasn't... it's not what it...", he stuttered, before he let out a sigh. "It belonged to my sister, Ilish"

Considerably calmer than before, he stopped walking and stood a dozen feet across from Hjalgar, as soon as they had reached a small target that stood against the western wall. Torvin and Gabin silently took place to Hjalgar's left, while Alys stood right beside Carvin. "Five shots...", the sellsword mumbled as he looked at Hjalgar. The young man gave him a nod, before he cocked an arrow and took aim. As Carvin and Alys watched him carefully, Hjalgar's arrow flew across the courtyard and almost hit the center of the target.

"That was... not bad", Carvin remarked, utterly surprised. He gave Alys a friendly smile. "You're just going to stand there, little lady?", he asked. "You have to cheer me on" Alys reciprocated his smile, albeit far less enthusiastically, as she raised a fist towards the sky. "Sure. Cheering you on", she remarked as flat and toneless as possible. "Go, Carvin, I guess..."

Carvin looked at her for a moment, raising an eyebrow, before both of them had to chuckle. "Changed my mind", he remarked. "Just stand at my side and look good, that should be cheering enough for me" He grinned, as he took aim with his bow, sending the arrow across the courtyard, where it hit the target slightly more to the centre, compared to Hjalgar's arrow. A pleased smile formed on Carvin's face, just as Hjalgar let out a displeased sound. "You bring me luck, Alys", Carvin joked and she caught him glancing at the ring on his finger once more. Even though she wanted to answer similarly light-hearted, her curiosity got once more the best of her. "What happened to your sister?", she asked and noticed that Carvin's smile vanished. The expression that replaced it wasn't all sadness. It was regret, yearning, the hint of fond memories. "I haven't seen her in years", Carvin mumbled slowly. "I was a different man back then. Selfish and hot-headed, always a terrible combination" He closed his eyes, just as Alys saw Hjalgar hitting the exact centre of the target. "I hurt her", Carvin admitted as he slowly pulled out another arrow from his quiver. "I regret it every second, but I don't know if I can set things right ever again. Both, me and Ilish, we might be gone too far for that" He pressed his lips together as he carefully took aim. "You still love her, don't you?", Alys asked and Carvin gave her a short nod, as he shot the arrow, hitting the target close to the centre again.

"Nice shot", she remarked and Carvin's smirk returned, even if it looked a tiny bit forced. "I know what you're trying to do, little lady", he informed her and she raised her eyebrows. "Do you?",

she remarked dryly. Carvin chuckled, as he watched Hjalgar taking aim for his third shot. "Looks like you took a liking to that beanpole over there. You're trying to put me off with your questions, so that I may loose to him", he answered with a sarcastic grin.

Alys took a deep breath, quickly shaking her head. "What?", she asked, trying to keep her voice down, so that Hjalgar wouldn't hear her. "Him? No! Not my type" Carvin's grin got a bit wider. "Interesting. So, who is your type then? Me?" Alys widely opened her eyes, even though she knew he wasn't serious at the moment. "No?", Carvin asked with a look of feigned disappointment on his face, just as Hjalgar took his third shot. "Who then? Anturion?"

This time, Alys almost had to join in on his big grin. "Hells no!", she answered quickly. "How old is he anyway?" "Thirty-two", Carvin answered immediately and Alys let out a short grunt.

"Almost twice my age", she revealed. "Although he is quite handsome, I have to adm..." Her smile vanished, as she glared at Carvin. "Why are we talking about this anyway?", she spat. With an infuriatingly wide smirk, Carvin pulled out another arrow from his quiver, cocking it without even looking at the target. He proceeded by shooting the arrow blindly at the target, hitting it slightly above the centre. "Because you tried to put me off my stride, so I put you off your stride first", he answered. Alys gave him a glare. "I never tried to do that and you know it. I was just curious", she hissed, even though she felt amused by this banter. "Just face it, Lady Alys, my nerves are way harder than yours", Carvin answered with a chuckle.

"You're unbelievable!", Alys laughed and Carvin gave her a nod. "I know", he answered, before he narrowed his eyes, looking at Hjalgar's friends. For a moment, she thought that the bearded man was looking at them, before she realized that he was looking right past them, across the whole courtyard and towards the eastern gate. She followed his glance and saw a group of riders entering Harrenhal. Even from afar she recognized their banners. House Tully of Riverrun.

Before she could react, Torvin started to walk towards her. She saw how Carvin put a hand on the hilt of his sword, but Torvin didn't even flinch as he walked straight past him. Alys shivered as he put one of his massive hands onto her shoulder. "Your room is in the King's Tower, right?", he asked and she gave him a nod, slightly intimidated by this huge man. Torvin looked at Carvin, letting out a sigh. "You are her friend?", he asked. "Bodyguard", Carvin clarified and Alys felt strangely flattered by this. "Good enough", Torvin answered. "Keep an eye on her"

With these ominous words, he removed his hand from Alys' shoulder and started to walk across the courtyard, towards the men from Riverrun. "Shit...", Hjalgar cursed. "We got to hurry, Carvin. I have something to do later" Carvin gave him a nod, looking towards the grey sky. "It's going to rain soon", he mumbled. "I hate rain" As he pulled his fourth arrow out of his quiver, Alys had to take a deep breath, not removing her gaze from Torvin. She had a bad feeling for this day.

Something was about to happen.

No Choices for this part

Jenna

Tricking the Septon... Jenna had no idea how she should do that. She had no doubt that he was guilty, but she needed a confession and for that, she had to play his little game. "So, what are we going to do next?", she asked. Corbin thought about this for a moment and she realized that he was sweating, nervously looking at the wound on her face.

"This is... this is a good question, Jenna", he complimented her. "For now, we know that Harris not only murdered Ser Ilhan, but also Lady Halla. Further, he tried to kill you as well. We have to use this knowledge against him"

"But... why are you so sure that it was him, Septon?", Jenna asked, noticing that she caught him off guard. The Septon attempted to shrug, but it ended as a pathetic shivering. "It... it just has to be. There is no other way", he stuttered and Jenna raised her eyebrows. "But, what if someone would try to frame him? To discredit him and to bring him down?", she asked.

"Would that necessarily be a bad thing?", Corbin answered, before he widely opened his eyes. "I mean... who would do this? The only ones who know the truth are you and me, unless you have told anyone else" He narrowed his eyes again, as he grabbed Jenna by the shoulders. "You haven't told anyone, have you?"

"You asked this before, Septon", Jenna answered, her heart beating loudly in her chest, as she avoided to look him in the eyes. "I have told no one. Not even my father knows, because he needs Harris' help in defeating this killer"

"Wolfius won't be a problem anymore as soon as Harris is dealt with", Corbin assured her and Jenna narrowed her eyes. "Why are you so sure of that, Septon?", she asked, her voice getting slightly sharper. Corbin thankfully let go of her shoulder, as he looked for an answer.

"Because...", he started to say, before he cut himself off. "Jenna, you are asking an awful lot of questions lately"

"And you're not answering, Septon", Jenna mumbled, causing Corbin to shake his head. "There is nothing to answer. We need to bring down Harris Flowers, or else he will never call his killer off", he growled, causing Jenna to give him a slightly surprised look. "Why should Harris call his killer off if we bring him down?", she asked.

"I did not mean Harris", Corbin was quick to explain, before he cut himself off, catching Jenna's glare. "Then who did you mean?", she asked toneless, her voice already shivering with anger.

"No more lies, Septon Corbin. Who did you mean?"

The Septon opened his mouth, obviously trying to explain what he just implied, before he closed it again and lowered his head in defeat. "I can't take it anymore", he mumbled. "I never wanted things to go that far. He told me it was all necessary, but I just can't take it anymore"

"Who is 'He'?", Jenna hissed, barely hiding her anger anymore. Septon Corbin looked at her, out of his puffy eyes, his lips pressed together, giving him the appearance of an upset dog.

"Butterfly", he finally answered, letting out a long sigh.

"Butterfly?", Jenna asked. "What kind of name is that?" Septon Corbin shrugged slightly. "The kind of name he uses to hide his real identity", he answered. "I don't know his real name. I have met him twice, once during my time at the Starry Sept and a second time half a year ago, here in Raylansfair"

"This Butterfly is the one who controls this killer?", Jenna asked and Corbin gave her a nod.

"Controlling might be a bit too much. He brought him here and he has ways to neutralize him later. Butterfly does not wish danger to the good citizens of Raylansfair...", he answered, still staring at the fresh scar on Jenna's temple. "At least he never intended something like this"

Jenna clenched her fists as she looked at this man she once trusted, this man who betrayed her. "And you knew he would order his beast to kill me and Halla?", she asked with shivering voice. Corbin decidedly shook his head. "No!", he exclaimed. "I had nothing to do with this. I simply told him everything you told me. Please, Jenna, you must believe me!"

"Must I?", Jenna asked coldly. Septon Corbin gave her a desperate look, obviously close to breaking down. "I had no idea he would order your death. Halla was my friend as well! Do not think this is easy for me!"

"And yet you still support him", Jenna growled, her anger getting stronger with every second. She never really liked Septon Corbin. Something had always been off with him. At the same time, he was a good listener, not entirely uncharismatic and with the smile of a kind uncle. These were his strengths, that way he had been able to manipulate her into trusting him.

"I support him because his cause is righteous", Corbin explained. "Butterfly is the only way this city, no, this whole kingdom can survive" Jenna gave him a look that was a mix between anger, disgust and curiosity. "Explain", she ordered and Corbin let out a sigh. "This kingdom is weak, you see. Mern Gardener is a weak king, House Gardener way past its prime. The larger cities are a mess of crime and corruption, the countryside is not much better, if you know where you have to look", he explained. "Butterfly realized this years ago. In its current state, the Reach wouldn't survive another war against the Storm King. Something has to change, or else we will all die"

"The Storm King wouldn't kill us all", Jenna interjected, but Corbin simply ignored her comment. "It is obvious that something has to change", he continued hastily. "We need a new king, a strong king" Finally, Jenna realized what he was implying. "Butterfly wants to be this king?", she asked in disbelief.

Corbin quickly shook his head. "Oh no, that would be presumptuous, wouldn't it?", he mumbled.

"No, there is a potential candidate. A strong king, a warrior, a man who has the power to control

not only the Reach” As he noticed Jenna's still angry glare, the look in his eyes got more derogatory. “Of course, I don't expect a child like you to understand it”

This time, Jenna had enough. Without holding back, she moved her hand forwards and gave the Septon a heavy and hopefully painful slap right in the face. At least from the sound of it, it had to hurt and the way he simply fell from the bench and onto the ground proved her right. “No, I don't understand it”, she hissed coldly. “Perhaps I am just not as smart as you, perhaps I am really just the stupid little child you think I am, but I don't see a righteous cause when I hear about your Butterfly. I see a man who ordered my death, whose men almost murdered my father. And Halla... I hated her with all my heart, but not even she deserved to die. Where is it righteous to sacrifice innocent lives?” She waited for a moment, as Corbin still lay on the ground, barely looking up to her. He was crying, she heard it, she saw it. “ANSWER ME!”, she screamed at the top of her lungs, as tears started to flow down her face as well.

Finally, Corbin looked up. “Some sacrifices need to be made”, he muttered bleakly. “Halla, Eaton, Robert... their faces will haunt my dreams forever, but they had to die, in order to give this kingdom the king it deserves” Before he was able to say anything else, Jenna grabbed him by the collar of his robe. On her own, she wouldn't have been strong enough to pull him up, but Septon Corbin supported her by standing up on his own accord. “What are you going to do now? Are you going to kill me now? Claim your revenge for what Butterfly's killer did to you and your father? To the housekeeper who tormented you for years?”, he asked, in complete defeat. It was obvious that he wouldn't even try to fight back. She saw the guilt in his eyes. She had no pity.

“No”, she growled with a low voice. “What you just told me, about Butterfly, about this ominous king he is supporting, you're going to tell it to Lord Harris. As soon as he is here in Raylansfair, you are going to tell it to Lord Tyrell. Afterwards you're going to tell it to the king. Then, someone will judge you and I don't think they will have mercy with you”

“I never wanted things to go that far!”, Corbin said, slightly louder than before. “I never wanted anyone to die. I only wanted to help this city, this kingdom! I am not the bad man here, Harris is! Why can't you see? I made a mistake, yes, I admit it, but Harris... Harris is a monster and you know it!”

She let go of his collar again and Corbin stumbled backwards, as if she had hit him again. “With a bit of luck, it will be Harris who gets the honour of executing you. One monster doing the dirty work by killing another monster”, she spat. “Because that's exactly what you are, Septon Corbin. You may hide behind your good intentions and your self-righteous hypocrisy, but you are nothing but another monster” She closed her eyes for a moment and had to remember what Ilhan once told her. “There will be a sword for you”, she promised.

Corbin sank back onto the bench, where he remained, shaking his head in disbelief. Jenna would have felt proud, if it wouldn't be for the anger that was boiling inside of her. She had to decide what to do with the Septon. Yes, he seemed cooperative, almost regretful, but he already tricked her once. Without a guard to accompany her, she had to trust on his cooperation to get him to the city guard headquarters. What if his apparent regret was nothing but a ruse, to get an advantage on her the moment she would let her guard down. If she would take him out of this Sept, he could overpower her, perhaps even kill her. Alternatively, she could just lock him in the Sept. She knew the building. It had only one exit and if she would lock it, there would be no way out for him. She could easily go to the headquarters alone and return with a few guardsmen. Of course, leaving him alone and unobserved was just as dangerous as forcing him to accompany her.

[Force him to accompany you to the city guard]

Drent

Drent looked after Argella, who quickly rushed towards the tower. For a moment, he was tempted to follow her. He was still afraid that he actually managed to hurt her, as unlikely as it seemed, but wasn't sure if talking to her would make things better or worse. Edonia brought up a good point. After what happened with Torrence, Drent wasn't too keen on taking the risk. Perhaps he could apologize another time, once she had time to calm down a bit.

"Sure, I'm going with you", he said and Edonia gave him a smile. "That's great to hear!", she said. "I'm sure you're going to like it. I mean, I bet you can need a break after being the princess' bodyguard for the evening" Her smile faded as she looked back to the kitchen tent. Torrence's prayer could still be heard. "I mean, I am thankful for how she handled Torrence", she explained and let out a sigh. "But she can be..."

"Demanding", Drent finished her sentence and she gave him a nod. "Demanding...", she agreed, as she and Drent walked through the nightly camp. "I mean, I can't really blame her. It can't be easy, being Argilac Durrandon's daughter" Drent quickly glanced towards the tower. "She seems to be very fond of him", he answered and Edonia raised an eyebrow. "She does? He never striked me as a good father", she remarked.

"It looks like she honestly loves him", Drent answered and Edonia slightly shook her head. "Well, someone has to", she mumbled, before turning her attention towards the campfire. Drent saw two figures sitting there and Edonia seemed to look slightly disappointed. "Looks like we missed most of the fun already, thanks to my brother", she chuckled. "Come on, perhaps we're not too late for a good time"

As Drent and Edonia approached the campfire, Drent recognized the two figures. Sitting next to each other on a large tree trunk and without noticing them sat Argella's advisor, Lady Taniel,

surprisingly close to Garen. It was Tarel who noticed them first. Immediately, she slid aside, a slightly surprised look on her face. "Drent!", she exclaimed. "I have not seen you coming" Garen leant back with a smirk on his face, looking from Drent to Edonia. "Long time no see, Drentie", he greeted him. "You made a new friend?" He raised an eyebrow, looking at Edonia for a moment, who sat down on a trunk on the opposite of Garen, Drent next to her.

"Could say the same for you", Drent answered and took a short bow in front of Tarel. "Mylady, I am surprised to see you here" Tarel chuckled, before her gaze wandered to the tower. "Where have you expected me to be, Drent?", she asked. "Princess Argella took the tower for herself and she made it clear that I am not wanted near her"

"But the king chose you to assist her", Drent remarked, not necessarily surprised at what he just learned. There was little love between Argella and Tarel, although he wasn't sure about the reasons behind their rivalry. A slightly bitter streak formed on Tarel's face, as she shook her head. Before she could answer, Garen cleared his throat. "It's what I tried to tell you earlier, Drentie. She dislikes Tarel for petty reasons and allows her personal feelings to get in the way of our mission", he growled. "And that makes her a terrible leader"

Drent shook his head, already annoyed by the sellswords condescending tone. "She did a better job than I expected, a lot better actually. You have to give her credit for it", he protested and Garen started to chuckle. "I have to give her body credit for looking very nice, but that's it", he answered with a smirk and Tarel narrowed her eyes for a short moment.

"She spared my brother", Edonia mumbled. "And for that, I will always be thankful" Garen raised his eyebrows and Drent wasn't sure if the sellsword was leaning forwards because he was curious, or because he wanted to continue to shamelessly stare at Edonia's chest. Perhaps it was a mixture of both. "Torrence, huh?", he chuckled. "What kind of stupid thing has he done again"

Before Edonia could answer, a new, quickly approaching figure, coming from the princess' tower, got everyone's attention. For a moment, Drent feared that it would be Emphrys Dresfel. The knight would have been furious over what happened, perhaps even as much as Argella, but certainly more violent. To his relief, the figure turned out to be Jax Montclair. The sergeant looked agitated, but not exactly angry. A stern glare hit Drent, Edonia and Garen and Montclair's dark blue eyes widened as he saw Tarel. "Lady Tarel", he greeted her with a stiff salute, before he looked at Drent and Edonia. "Golton. Bernile", he continued and Edonia gave him a friendly smile. "Sergeant Montclair, is anything the matter?", she asked.

Montclair gave her a short nod, glancing over his shoulder at the tower. "Golton, I have one question and I want you to answer me honestly... What the fuck did just happen here in the camp?", he growled. "I have just seen something I never again want to see on the Storm

Princess' face. Her lip was bleeding and the look in her eyes... what the hell have you done with her?"

Drent opened his mouth, but before he was able to answer, Edonia intervened. "Sergeant, with all due respect, but Drent is completely innocent here. My brother did something stupid, but the princess already dealt with him", she explained. Montclair closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

"What has Torrence done this time?", he asked. "He hit her in the face. Accidentally, I guess...", Drent quickly answered, noticing that Montclair and Tariel looked at him with a slightly horrified expression, while Garen showed surprising amusement. The sergeant gave him a nod avoiding to look at Edonia, before he sat down next to Drent. "Is he...?", he started to say, before he cut himself off, giving Edonia an apologetic look, before he noticed her facial expression.

"Torrence is fine", she revealed to him. "The princess was merciful. She left him alive and unharmed even though he is currently making a fool out of himself" She glanced at Garen and narrowed her eyes for a moment, obviously aware that he was ogling at her. "And for that I will be thankful"

Montclair gave her a nod, even though he looked clearly frustrated. "That wasn't the first time I got a negative opinion on Torrence", he revealed. "He is absolutely loyal to House Durrandon, which is pretty much the best thing I can say about him. He is not very well-liked amongst the men, to put it mildly" His gaze hardened, as he looked Edonia straight in the eyes. "Are you sure you can keep him under control?", he asked. "This time he might got lucky, but I am sure it won't be the last time he got himself in some trouble"

Edonia pressed her lips together and gave him a slight nod. "I am afraid I have to agree", she answered. "My little brother can be a little.. difficult at times" "More like a little bastard", Garen commented, earning himself a glare from Edonia. "Don't call my brother a bastard", she hissed. "He has his flaws, but..."

"But nothing", Garen cut her off. "I think I came to know Torrence Bernile quite well during my stay in Storm's End, but I failed to see any likeable qualities in him. He's rude, dismissive and his constantly bad mood really gets on my nerves"

"Which sounds exactly like you", Edonia growled. "But at least he has his loyalty, unlike you, sellsword" Garen opened his mouth to give her an answer, but he was cut off by Tariel. "That is enough", she hissed. "From both of you. I don't tolerate petty arguments in my presence" She looked at Edonia and gave her a kind smile. "I am sure Torrence has his positive sides as well" To Drent's surprise, Edonia shook her head. "When he was younger, yes, but nowadays, I am not so sure anymore. At times, it feels like I don't even know him anymore. There's only the Storm King for him", she answered, looking quite sad for a moment. "But still..."

"He's family, huh?", Montclair remarked and smirked as Edonia looked at him in surprise. "You have family too, Sergeant?", she asked and he gave her a nod. "Two sons, Camden and Calib",

he answered. "Unlike your brother, I get along with them very well. But the feeling is the same, so I still understand you. They mean the world for me"

"Don't take that personally, sergeant, but I never thought of you as a family man", Drent remarked and Montclair's smirk faded. "I can see why you got that opinion, Golton", he growled and uncomfortable silence followed. It was Tarel who broke it, by giving Drent a bright smile. "I realized I know nothing about you, Drent", she chirped, as if to diffuse the slightly hostile situation. Edonia and Garen were still glaring at each other, while Montclair was not exactly a talkative person, so Drent was thankful for her attempt. "Do you have any family?"

Drent shook his head. "Not anymore", he answered flatly. "Once there were my parents and a fiancée. My parents died in a ship accident, my fiancée died after a long illness" He felt Edonia's hand on his shoulder, as she gave him a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry to hear that...", she murmured and he let out a sigh, forcing himself to smile at her. "That has been years ago. I'm over it, really", he lied. Tarel gave him a gentle nod. "You're not from the Stormlands are you?", she asked to his surprise and smirked widely when he gave her a confused look. "Small mannerisms. The way you pronounce certain words. It's not very noticeable, but I had to discard the same manners once", she explained. "From the way you're talking, I guess you've been in the Stormlands for at least five years now"

"Seven", Drent answered, impressed at her perception. "Originally, I come from Cider Hall. When my fiancée died, I had nothing left in the Reach. My grandfather was a Stormlander, so I left my old kingdom to find work in a new. Turned out I had a talent for fighting" Montclair gave him an approving nod. "Which I can confirm. You also impressed the right people, or else you wouldn't be here with us today" He glared at the small group, but especially at Garen. "All of you impressed someone to be here, keep that in mind"

"So, Lady Tarel, there is one thing I had to think about", Drent remarked. Tarel looked at him and flashed him a genuinely beautiful smile as she raised an eyebrow. "I listen, Drent", she answered. "You were born in Raylansfair, am I right?", he asked and Tarel gave him a nod. "Is that going to be a personal question?", she asked and Drent had to chuckle. "Somewhat", he admitted. "I was wondering what you can tell me about the city. After all, we're basically going to occupy it soon"

"We're not going to occupy anything", Tarel corrected him. "We come to claim King Argilac's birthright, nothing more. If anything, we drive the illegitimate current rules out of it. But as long as we don't get the order, there won't be bloodshed"

Garen smirked at this and couldn't suppress a chuckle. "Considering who leads us, I doubt we will stay peaceful for long", he remarked. "Never spilled a Reachman's blood before. I have to say, I am honestly excited"

Tariel chuckled as if Garen had made a joke, even though Drent was sure that he had been serious. "There won't be any bloodshed, that's why I accompany you", she assured him. "Argella might not like me, but I have still some influence in Raylansfair. I can prevent things from escalating. We're claiming Raylansfair peacefully and legally"

"How can you be so sure?", Edonia asked and Drent noticed that she glanced at her quiver, filled with arrows. It was obvious that Edonia wasn't too keen on the thought of bloodshed, unlike Garen. Drent himself had a neutral opinion about it. He wasn't hungry for a fight and he was reasonably sure that he would never harm a civilian, but he had no problem to fight to defend his princess, if necessary. However, he seriously hoped that Tariel's plan would be enough to claim the city peacefully.

"As I said before, I still have some influence in the city", Tariel explained. "I was born in a poor family, the people of Raylansfair looked down on me for all my life, except one person..." A distant look appeared in her eyes before she continued. "Unlike me, my friend Sherryl made it big in life far earlier than me. When we grew up, we were best friends and even now, we still write each other. She eventually caught Lord Raylan's eye, long before I first met the Storm King. On Raylan's orders, Sherryl spent years in Oldtown, supplying him with information. Now that he died, she returned to the city. We made this plan together"

Drent noticed that she glanced at Garen for a moment, looking at his well-toned body, while the hint of a smile appeared on her face. "Some men have a strong body, but a weak mind. The current ruler of Raylansfair is one of these men", she revealed. "I still know Harris Flowers from my childhood. Back then, he had been a handsome man, although I doubt the years have been kind to him. Nonetheless, Sherryl plans to seduce him, to influence him, to see enemies everywhere, except us. If her plan works, he will be friendly to us, friendly but without real allies. Bringing him down will be easy, quick and hopefully, peaceful"

"You really thought this through, huh?", Montclair remarked and Tariel gave him a cold glance. "You disapprove, Sergeant?", she asked and Montclair gave her a nod. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate peaceful ways to solve a problem if possible, but, mylady, we are foreigners to them and we have the order to take this city, by all means necessary"

"By all means the princess deems necessary", Edonia interjected. "After seeing the way she dealt with Torrence tonight..." She paused for a moment, listening to her brothers still audible prayer. "After witnessing the way she deals with such a situation, I doubt she would approve of bloodshed"

"We're talking about a Durrandon here", Garen remarked. "They have been warrior kings, first and foremost. Why should Argella deal with this any other than her father would do?" "Because Torrence still has both of his hands", Edonia answered decisively. Garen shrugged indifferently.

"Whatever it is she is going to do, I hope for a battle. I've been hired to kill something, not to sit around and babysit daddy's darling"

"You're out of line, Garen", Drent remarked, utterly annoyed at the sellsword's attitude. "Once again" Garen gave him a glare and was about to say something, when Tarel cut him off by putting a hand on his chest. She looked up, at Drent and Montclair, before quickly removing her hand again. "Whatever Argella is going to do, I am sure at least some of us will be satisfied with the outcome", she summarized the situation with remarkable tactfulness.

Montclair gave her a nod, before he raised from the trunk he was sitting on. "For once, I have to agree with you, Lady Tarel", he said, before taking a stilted bow in front of the group. "I'm afraid I have to leave you now. It has been a long day for all of us and I'll be up early in the morning. If I understood the princess correctly, she plans to leave before shortly after dawn, so I would advise you to go to sleep soon"

Before the Sergeant turned around, he leant down and grabbed Drent's shoulder. "One more thing, Golton", he growled. "I won't hold it against you, because I know you always do your best, but Princess Argella looked horribly upset when I saw her storming into that tower. Keep that in mind next time you talk to her"

With these words, he turned around and soon vanished into the night. Only then, Drent noticed Garen's wide smirk. "Trouble in paradise?", the sellsword asked. Tarel gave him another short glare, but stayed silent, aside from a loud yawn. "What do you mean?", Drent asked, his voice finally showing how annoyed he was at Garen.

Before the sellsword could answer, Tarel quickly intervened. "Sergeant Montclair has been right", she chirped. "It is a long night and we should go to bed, what do you think, Garen?" For a moment, Drent and Edonia looked at her in surprise, considering what she just implied, before she finally realized it. "I mean... I mean, I should go to my bed, but you should also go to bed. Your bed" She let out a stilted chuckle and Garen slightly rolled with his eyes. "Yes, you should do that. Good night, Lady Tarel", he answered rather coldly. Tarel's forced chuckle ended abruptly and she gave him the hint of a nod, before raising from the trunk. "I suppose you are right", she mumbled, before she gave Drent and Edonia a friendly smile. "Talking to you has been nice. I wish you a pleasant night" With these words, she quickly left the campfire. Garen looked after her with a grin on his face. "Women...", he growled and shook his head, the grin still on his face. "I just don't get them"

"That I see", Edonia mumbled, earning herself a glare from the sellsword. "Anyway, Drentie", Garen continued. "I see you had the pleasure of spending some time in the company of our revered princess. I'm not sure if I should congratulate or pity you"

"Both would be inappropriate", Drent answered, glancing at Edonia. The woman let out a small yawn, before she sluggishly raised from the trunk. "I think I had enough for tonight", she

mumbled. "I'll go to sleep, but before that, I'm going to talk to my stupid brother about what happened tonight" She leant down and gave Drent a light hug. "It was nice making your acquaintance, Drent", she said. "Thank you for standing up against Torrence tonight. I am not sure how things would have ended if you wouldn't have intervened. He can be an asshole, but he's still my little brother and for that, I owe you one"

And with these words, she was gone, leaving Drent and Garen behind. "Aww, why don't I get a hug?", Garen chuckled. "You made quite the impression on that girl" "Just like you made quite the impression on Lady Taniel", Drent answered quickly and to his satisfaction, Garen's smile faded. "Don't talk about things you know nothing about, Drentie", he growled.

Drent raised an eyebrow. "Funny coming from you", he snarled, before standing up as well.

"Honestly, talking to you makes me tired. I'll go to bed as well" Garen gave him a nod and stood up too. "That makes two of us", he muttered, before he apparently remembered something.

"One more thing, Drentie..." He narrowed his eyes glancing from Drent to the tower. "You talked quite a long time to your princess"

"Our princess", Drent corrected him and Garen rolled with his eyes. "Our princess", he agreed, imitating Drent's voice. "What I want to know is, have you talked about anything in particular?"

Drent pressed his lips together as he heard this, avoiding to look Garen in the eye. As much as he disliked the sellsword, he had basically betrayed his trust earlier this day and the thought slightly irked him. He had told Argella that Garen was dissatisfied with her leadership. He has seen how she dealt with Torrence and even though she had been merciful with him, he wasn't sure how good she reacted to criticism, especially after a day like this, especially coming from someone as utterly dismissive as Garen.

Part of him wanted to warn Garen, to be careful and to watch his tongue the next time he would talk to the princess. As much as he disliked him, not even Garen deserved to be the target of Argella's fury. What if she would punish him worse than she punished Torrence. Would she even punish him at all? He could warn him now, even though Garen would probably be enraged that he had breached his trust, at least at first, perhaps even forever. The question was, after being exposed to the sellsword's pesky arrogance the whole evening, was Drent still willing to warn him? Perhaps he deserved to be humbled a little bit.

[Warn Garen]

Raenna

There it was again. The kind, wrinkly, fatherly smile she had grown to love in her early teens. Now that she was older, Raenna wasn't sure if this kindness was genuine, but back then, it meant the world to her. She knew, she couldn't refuse his pleas. "Alright, I will help you", she

answered with a sigh, before her gaze hardened. "But this is the last time. I have left this live behind"

Terrorma gave her a sad, but understanding smile, undoubtedly pleased at her decision, but sullen at the same time. "People like us... We never leave this live behind, little Raenna", he said warmly. "I tried it and I failed. Sooner or later, it always catches up again" He noticed her facial expression and let out a sigh. "Nonetheless, I appreciate your help. I know this is not easy for you", he consoled her and attempted to put a hand on her shoulder.

Raenna quickly shrugged his hand off and shook her head. "One thing should be clear. I like you, but I'm not doing this for you, old man", she hissed. "I'm not doing this for you and I'm not doing this to get revenge on Clayton. I'm only doing this for Kersea" She avoided to look into his gentle eyes and stared down the alleyway instead. It felt weird that he was once again a part of her life, it felt as wonderful as it felt wrong.

"I am well aware of that", Terrorma answered with a gentle look in his eyes. "Still, it feels good to know that you'll support me, one last time" Raenna had to reciprocate his smile as she started to get used to his presence again. "You do this for Kersea too, right?", she asked and he gave her a nod. "And for Clayton", he mumbled. "Back when I first met him, he wasn't that different from you"

Raenna gave him a nod. He was right. She remembered Clayton how he had been. Always a bit aloof, but nonetheless caring towards those close to him, even kind at times. He had been her friend and as strange as it felt now, she used to have a huge crush on him in her mid-teens. Before Terrorma left the group. Before Clayton started to lead them and before he changed. "What are your plans for him?", she asked and Terrorma let out a sigh. "For a while, I loved Clayton like a son", he mumbled and she saw deep sadness in his eyes. "If only half of the things I have heard about him are true, he is little more than a rabid dog by now... and there is only one merciful thing to do with a rabid dog"

In silence, the two started to walk down the street and Raenna slowly glanced at him. Optically, the Old Man hadn't changed a bit. She knew him for over ten years now and he had always looked old, even though he was barely sixty years old. He grew the remains of his hair a bit longer now, tied to a short ponytail and a few fine, additional wrinkles were visible on his face, but overall, he still looked like she remembered him. But she saw subtle and slightly unnerving changes on him. The way he spoke, the way he looked at her... it was clear to her that Terrorma felt something he had always warned her of. He felt remorse.

Remorse... Raenna had a difficult relationship with remorse. Terrorma had taught her that remorse was a luxury she couldn't afford in her line of work and even if she wasn't always able to follow his advice, she tried her best. Kersea on the other hand never listened to him and over

the past five years, it broke Raenna's heart to see how she tormented herself with what she did. And now the Old Man started to feel it himself. The thought terrified her.

They stopped in front of a rundown house in a narrow alleyway. A faded sign informed Raenna that this building had been a butcher's shop once. "This is where I currently live", Terroma informed her as he pulled a small key out of his pocket and started to unlock the door. "I have to warn you though, I do not live alone"

Raenna raised an eyebrow as she watched him opening the door. "You have a friend in this city?", she asked and he gave her a nod. "Do you remember what I have told you, what I did before I trained you and Clayton?", he asked. Yes, Raenna remembered. Terroma had been part of a different group, its members long since scattered around the world, most of them dead by now. "You found one of your old friends?", she asked and Terroma shook his head. "I found his son", he explained.

With these words, they entered the dark room behind the door. Raenna narrowed her eyes for a moment, before she let out a sigh and quickly drew her dagger. Before Terroma could react, she spun around, pointing the edge of the blade at the man who was standing in the darkness behind the door, pointing a crossbow at her. Her knife was inches away from his throat, but his bolt was similarly pointed directly at hers. In the darkness, she was still able to see his facial features. He was taller than her and perhaps in his late twenties, with pale skin, brown hair and a short, rugged beard. The look in his brown eyes wasn't hostile, just highly distrustful.

"Is that your friend?", she hissed and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Terroma slowly nodding. "Put down your weapons", he ordered sternly. "Both of you" The man followed his order immediately, while Raenna did it somewhat reluctantly. She wasn't used to this authoritative tone in Terroma's voice anymore.

"Samuel, this is Raenna Minsworth, my old protégée", he introduced her. "Raenna, this is Samuel Puffer" Raenna glanced from Samuel to Terroma, before she realized where she had heard this name before. "Puffer... I have heard about your father", she mumbled and Samuel gave her a slightly surprised look. "You knew him?", he asked. Raenna shook her head, finally pulling her hood down. She noticed that he glanced at her hair for a moment. "I spent half a decade with the Old Man. Never met any of his friends, but I've heard the stories"

"And you have trained under Terroma?", Samuel asked. "Like Clayton?" Raenna narrowed her eyes, but before she could say anything, Terroma answered for her. "Not like Clayton", he explained. "Raenna had always been better than him" A soft smile formed at her face for a moment as she looked at her mentor.

"So, what is your plan?", she asked, to quickly change the subject. "Do you even know where Briar is located? Or Clayton?" Terroma did not answer. Instead, he looked at Samuel. The man

had a light smirk on his face. "It was my job to find that out", he explained. "I know this city better than Terrorma and had a few old friends to ask"

His smirk vanished again and his gaze hardened as he looked from Raenna to Terrorma. "I had a long talk with one of Butterfly's men. He knew where they hold Briar", he explained. "The cells below the Hightower"

Raenna noticed the expression on Terrorma's face and gave him a consoling look. "This is bad, huh?", she asked and he gave her a nod. "Worse", he mumbled, before he looked at Samuel. "Are you sure?" The other man nodded shortly and let out a sigh. "I am sure the man I kindly asked told me the truth, let's keep it at that", he growled. "Briar Catelins is held below the Hightower"

"This means Commander Mullendore works with Butterfly?", Terrorma asked and finally, Raenna understood why he was so baffled by this reveal. Samuel shook his head. "I asked the same question", he said. "The answer is 'No'. The cells are a labyrinth that got down all the way to the Hightowers foundation and more than half of them is out of order. Butterfly uses them as one of his main hideouts, right under Mullendore's nose"

"He's hidden in plain sight", Terrorma mumbled. "I have to give the man some credit, that's actually brilliant" He looked up, just as he noticed that Samuel was about to say something.

"One more thing, Terrorma", he mumbled. "While you were gone, we had a visitor. A young girl, perhaps around twelve years old, tall for her age. Braavosi, judging by the accent"

Terrorma's eyes widened. "Ellena...", he mumbled and Raenna slightly shook her head. "The girl you lied to?", she asked and immediately regret it, when she saw the hurt expression on his face. "Sorry...", she mumbled weakly. "The girl I lied to", Terrorma agreed with a toneless voice. "Partially, at least. I... why was she here?"

"She had a letter for you, written by the Burned Man", Samuel explained and Terrorma narrowed his eyes. "Arkan...", he growled. "Has she... said anything? Is she working for him now?" Samuel quickly shook his head. "She barely said anything. One of his men was with her"

"You think she was afraid?", Terrorma asked and Samuel gave him a short nod. "Not of him", he quickly explained. "Of me. I guess I wasn't looking too trustworthy. In the end, she refused to give me that letter"

"Smart girl...", Terrorma mumbled and a forced smile appeared on his face. "It does not matter. We have our target. As smart as Butterfly is, we know where to strike now. We deal with the letter later"

Raenna raised her eyebrows as she looked from him to Samuel. "You plan to infiltrate the Hightower?", she asked and noticed the enthusiastic look in Terrorma's eyes. Somehow, it was even more unnerving than his remorse. "I am actually looking forward for it", he revealed. "I

have been gone for so long, tried to hide what I was, what I am, until I almost forgot it. But this is now over”

“Doesn't change the fact that you still need a plan”, Raenna said sceptically. Terroma gave her a short nod. “Indeed, I will”, he agreed. “We will infiltrate the Hightower, but we shouldn't do it hastily. First, we need to create a good plan. We need to find out when the guards change, we should look for alternative entrances and we need plans of the Hightower and of the labyrinth beneath”

“I can do that”, Samuel promised. “As soon as we have everything we need, we will get Kersea's sister out of there and we then we will track down Clayton”, Terroma continued.

Raenna gave him a nod. “I agree”, she mumbled. “But... what comes then? After you freed Kersea and her sister, after you stopped Clayton, what are your plans?”

Terroma closed his eyes for a moment, looking a lot older than he truly was. “Valar Morghulis”, he slowly answered.

No Choices for this part

Richard

“Go, get Urid!”, Richard yelled and Philip immediately darted downwards again. He put his focus on Darren now, ignoring the worry he had for his friends. The knight wore a heavily plated armour and Richard wasn't sure if he would be able to lift him alone, with his wounded leg. He reached down and grabbed Darren's shoulders, as he slowly started to pull him up.

“Come on, come on...”, he hissed as he put far too much weight on his wounded leg. Pain flashed through his whole body, as he slowly managed to pull the knight up. Darren let out a groan and thankfully opened his eyes, blinking and coughing from the smoke. Out of his own power, he staggered back onto his feet, holding his shoulder in obvious pain.

“Harking...”, he growled. Richard grabbed his unwounded shoulder, thankful that he woke up again. “Not now!”, he barked. “We have to get out of here!” Darren quickly gave him a nod and slowly stumbled towards the stairs, Richard closely behind him. He realized that the knight could have run faster, his legs weren't wounded after all, but it looked like he chose to stay behind with him, to make sure that Richard himself wouldn't burn to death in this warehouse. As he looked down, he saw dark red blood staining his leg. His wound had reopened and the pain was worse than ever. This was not good...

As they arrived in the warehouse's ground floor, Richard immediately saw a body lying in the flames. For a moment, panic threatened to overcome him, as he feared the worst for Philip or Urid. Then he saw his friends. Philip was kneeling on the ground, a desperate expression on his face as he tried to remove the heavy bar that had crashed down onto Urid's leg. The bar was

burning brightly and Urid obviously had passed out from the pain. Despite his own pain, Philip attempted to reach down, trying to grab the boiling hot wood, only to recoil in pain.

“Get out of here, Harking!”, Darren yelled over the sound of the crackling fire, as he rushed towards Urid. Richard himself looked at the main entrance, quickly realizing that he wouldn't get out of there. The fire had almost surrounded them and definitely cut them off the main entrance. Despite his wounded shoulder, Darren effortlessly reached down and grabbed the bar with both hands. His plated gloves obviously helped, but the pained scream he let out as he threw the bar deep into the warehouse proved how much it still hurt him. For a moment, he went on his knees, before Richard stopped next to him, pulling him back onto his feet. In the meantime, Philip picked up the unconscious Urid as he made a dash for the side entrance. Richard and Darren followed closely and Richard actually had to rely on the knight to keep him on his feet, as his own wounded leg was barely able to support his weight anymore.

Blinded by smoke, unable to breathe and in pain because of the heat, Richard staggered out of the backdoor just as a cracking sound behind him signaled the roof giving in. With a bit of luck, the assassins would crash down with it, but he knew, it was a foolish hope. He finally went onto his knees, just as Darren did the same, allowing painfully cold air to fill his lungs, as he started to cough violently.

He looked up to Philip, who was still the least wounded out of them. His hands were covered in burn blisters, but he did not seem to be in a lot of pain. Instead, he looked at Urid, who was unconscious. Both of his friends upper legs had deep cuts and burns on them, from the log that crashed down on him and he was bleeding heavily. Richard was no healer, but he knew Urid needed someone to look at these wounds, or else he wouldn't survive this night. It was a mercy that he was unconscious at the moment, because the pain had to be excruciating.

“Harking!”, a familiar voice rasped and as he looked down the alleyway, he saw half a dozen guards, with them Commander Hackor and Jarow. The Lord of Bridges had a rudimentary bandaged shoulder, but other than that, he looked alive and somewhat fine, save for the anger on his face. Hackor on the other hand was pale, holding his chest and coughing violently.

“You bastards...”, Philip hissed. “You left Urid to die!” Hackor shook his head and staggered to the side, causing one of the guardsmen to grab his arm. “We saved the commander!”, another guardsman barked. “So mind your place, peasant”

Before Philip could answer again, obviously angered at these words, Hackor managed to raise a hand. “No...”, he coughed, his voice regaining more of his former strength and authority with every word. “You saved your own skin and one of you had the decency to pull me out of this warehouse. Philip is right. It should have been your duty... my duty to protect the smallfolk!” He cut himself off and looked at Richard and his friends. “I failed you, Harking, and for that, I am sorry”

"Good for you, but that does not change the fact that Urid still needs help!", Philip urged them.

"Look at him, he's not going to survive the night without a healer" Richard shivered at these words. He had feared such a moment ever since he heard about Eaton's death. "We have no healer", he mumbled sullenly, only for Hackor to shake his head. "We have one", he answered to Richard's surprise. "Sort of, at least. A young woman, a visitor in our city"

He looked at two of his guardsmen. "You know where Mathea lives, don't you?", he asked and his men gave him dutiful nods. "The what are you waiting for?", he snarled. "She has to look at Urid, and probably at Harking and Philip too"

"But... commander, what's with you?", one of the guardsmen asked. Hackor, still surprisingly strong, grabbed him by the shoulder. "You see this?", he asked and moved his hand over his chest, only slightly shivering while he did so. "My armour saved my life. It hurts like hell, but I will survive it. I won't bother our only healer because of a broken rib, not when a life is on the line"

"Me neither", Darren coughed. "My shoulder is dislocated, perhaps even broken, I don't know. But I will survive. I survived worse and I have no intentions of dying from a single crossbow bolt" As if he wanted to prove this, he started to walk to the guardsmen on his own. His walk was a bit off and the heavy armour obviously dragged him down, but he managed to do it, looking triumphantly at Hackor.

"I don't need any help either", Jarow cawed, even though the bandages around his shoulder were soaked in blood. As he realized the looks Hackor and Richard were giving him, he glared at them almost angrily. "No!", he yelled. "I do not allow anyone to die because of me! I know what I can survive and I know, I will survive this"

"It's settled then...", Hackor mumbled, looking at his guards. "You two carry Urid to Mathea. And you help Harking, I doubt he makes it far with his leg!" Immediately, his guards saluted and what previously looked like a beaten and bruised bunch of weaklings immediately became something that resembled a unit of soldiers.

Hackor let out a sigh and walked towards Richard. "Listen, Harking", he mumbled, looking at the ground. "I knew, this did not work out today. I lost some of my men, Darren lost some of his men and your friend here is more dead than alive" He extended his hand and his gaze moved upwards until he looked Richard straight in the eye. Slowly, Richard grabbed his hand and shook it. "I see the look in your eyes. What happened today wasn't your fault. Only the enemy is to blame"

Richard weakly shook his head, glancing at Urid. "Say that to the dead", he muttered, before he let out a sigh. "Commander, I am sorry for today. I tried to help and in the end..." He looked over his shoulder at the burning warehouse. Hackor gave him a nod. "We will talk about this as soon as you're back on your feet", he growled and looked down onto Richard's bleeding leg. "We will get the people who did this, I swear it"

With these words, he gave a short sign and the two guards grabbed Urid, rather gently, while another guard put his arm around Richard, supporting his weak leg during their walk. "Get them to the healer. Tell her, if she saves their lives, she will be richly rewarded", Hackor barked.

Richard only managed to give him a thankful nod, as the commander, Darren and Jarow stayed behind. Philip walked next to him in silence, blowing cold air onto his wounded hands.

"Are you alright, Philip?", Richard asked, as the two followed the guardsmen through the night. His friend looked up, before slowly shaking his head, the hint of tears in his eyes as he glanced at the unconscious Urid. "He ran in right before me. He was so eager to help... I should have stopped him", he mumbled. "I should have hold him back. At the very least, I should have ran inside before him. It could have easily been me instead of him and perhaps it would have been better that way" He paused again, closing his eyes for a moment. "Urid has a family. He mustn't die tonight. I on the other hand... what do I have?" "You have us", Richard answered. "You know you can always count on your friends" Philip gave him a solemn nod. "Nonetheless... that does not change the fact that you and Urid, you have people who depend on you. Your children need you", he mumbled. "I can't stand the thought of seeing them grow up without a father"

"And they won't", Richard tried to convince him, or perhaps he was just trying to convince himself. "We will get Urid to this healer and she will help him. He's going to be fine again" Philip only slightly shook his head, but said nothing. In silence, they continued their way through the city. Richard had lived here his whole live, but in the darkness, in his current, dizzy state, he barely realized where they were going. Finally, he saw the city walls in the distance, ten feet tall, solid stone. Richard knew few people in this part of the city. There was nothing of interest here, usually at least. Now, they apparently looked for the only healer in the whole city down here. The guardsmen knew the way, thankfully. The man who supported Richard pointed at a small house. In the darkness, it managed to stick out by being brightly illuminated from the inside. Candles, at least a dozen, burning brightly in the night. "Here she lives", the man explained and slowly separated from Richard, before walking up to the door. "Mathea!", he shouted and knocked onto the door.

"The door is open", a female voice answered from the inside. The guardsmen who carried Urid walked closer, followed by Philip and a limping Richard, just as the guardsman opened the door. Behind it, Richard saw a young, dark-haired woman, standing next to a table, inside a sparsely furnished room. Atop the table lay...

"Rosie?", Philip gasped as he rushed past Richard and into the room. Atop the table, Richard saw Rosalie Mettel, unconscious, a blood-soaked bandaged over her belly. Mathea gave him a stern, yet understanding look out of strangely coloured, orange eyes, extending her arm to keep him away from Rosalie. "You know her?", she asked and Philip gave her a nod. "She is a friend...", he mumbled, his eyes widely opened. Behind him, laying on a small bed and deeply

asleep, despite the noise Richard, Philip and three guardsmen made, lay Lyria. She had a fresh cut on her cheek and a second one on her temple, only barely cleaned.

Mathea looked up and noticed the look on Richard's face, while she heavily bandaged Rosalie's belly. "You know both of them, I see", she deduced, before she let out a sigh. "Lyria is alright, but I gave her the milk of the poppy, to help her sleep. Rosalie will most likely survive this night" Philip pressed his lips together and Mathea looked down again. "She will survive this night. I'm going to make sure of that"

For the first time since they entered the house, she moved her attention towards Urid and her face dropped. "He's the one you came for?", she asked and one of the guardsmen shook his head. "All three of them need your help, Mathea", he explained. "Commander Hackor promises a rich reward..." "No", she cut him off. "I'm not doing this for the reward. I'm doing it for them"

She pointed at the guard who supported Richard during the way. "You're going to assist me", she ordered in a voice that sounded surprisingly authoritative, compared to her slender frame. The guardsman clumsily saluted in front of her, just as she pointed at a small cupboard. "In the middle drawer, you'll find blankets. Take two of them and put them onto the ground" Still bandaging Rosalie's belly at the same time, she looked at the guardsmen who carried Urid.

"And you put him onto these blankets, gently", she ordered with a stern voice, before finally taking a step back from the unconscious Rosalie. "She will survive", she said and the hint of a tired smile appeared on her face. "Seven blessings, this girl is tougher than she looks like..." She looked up at Philip and her smile got wider, even though Richard saw the dark rings under her eyes, indicating a serious lack of sleep. "You can be relieved, your friend will survive this night", she promised and for the first time since they had left the warehouse, Richard saw how Philip let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you", he said with a firm voice, just as Mathea glanced from him to Richard. "Your leg is bleeding", she said, looking at Richard, before moving her gaze to Philip. "And your hands have some mild burns"

Philip quickly shook his head. "I am fine. I don't need your attention, Urid needs it", he urged her and Mathea gave him a quick nod. "You're right, you'll be fine", she agreed, before reaching down to a large bag that stood under the table. She pulled a small box out of it and carefully handed it to him. "Burn ointment", she explained. "You can apply it yourself. Be generous with it and your hands will be fine in a few days"

"And now you...", she said and looked at Richard. He wanted to shake his head, just as Philip did, but found himself stumbling towards the wall of the house, leaning on it, as he finally noticed the blood loss. "You're not fine", Mathea said dryly. "I need to bandage your leg, or else you might bleed to death"

This time, Richard managed to shake his head. "Urid needs your help first. I only need some linen and I can bandage myself" Mathea gave him a complimenting look, carefully handing him a bandage roll. "Good thinking", she said, before she rushed towards Urid. "And now to you...", she mumbled, visibly suppressing a curse. "You two assist me. Hold him down, carefully", she ordered two of the guards, shortly glancing at the third one. "You bring me more candles. This does not look good..."

Philip closed his eyes and sighed, before he turned around. "I need some fresh air...", he muttered and Mathea gave him a nod without even looking at him. "Out there is a small bench. You can bandage your leg on it", she said, obviously speaking to Richard. He understood the hint and followed Philip outside, giving her the space she needed to help Urid.

The air outside of Mathea's house seemed to be even colder than before. Richard looked around and quickly spotted Philip sitting on a bench, looking at the sky. He limped towards him and forced himself to smile at him. "Urid is going to be fine", he reassured him and Philip shook his head. "You already said that", he muttered. "It's not only Urid, it's Lyria and Rosie too..." Richard let out a sigh, trying his best not to think about what he saw inside this house. Lyria lying on this bed, Rosalie on the table, the blood... "Philip, I know you like her...", he started to say, before Philip cut him off. "Not like you think", he explained. "Yes, I know about her feelings of me, but... she's what, ten years younger than me? She's a child. What kind of man do you think I am?"

"One of the best I know", Richard answered truthfully. Philip did not answer to this, instead he looked back at the sky. "She reminds me of my daughter, in some way...", he revealed and Richard gave him a surprised look. "You have a daughter?", he asked, immediately noticing the sad look on his friend's face. "Had", Philip answered. "Her name was Lilith. I also had a wife, Lara, back when I still lived in the North"

"I... what happened to them?", Richard asked. It was kinda strange, now that he thought about it. For years, Philip Loren was one of his closest friends. But he never talked about his past before. "They were killed...", Philip revealed. "Murdered... Don't you understand, Richard? The reason why I want to bring these assassins down is because I have experienced such a thing before. The people who killed my family had been ordinary bandits, they... they did it while I was out hunting. I don't know what they did to my wife and my daughter and I don't want to think about it, but they killed them and burned their corpses together with our house" A determined gaze appeared on Philip's face. "I returned from my hunting trip to find only a smouldering ruin and two charred corpses. So I tracked them down, the people who did this. It was all I had left. I found their hideout, an abandoned building. Sneaked through the window at night. I slit their leaders' throat, slowly, before locking the doors and setting the building on fire. I... I made sure none of them had a chance to escape"

He paused again, looking down on the ground. "I told myself that I did it to stop them from hurting someone else the way they hurt me, the way they hurt my family. But I also did it for revenge. When they burned alive in that building, it felt... justified", he mumbled, before looking at Richard, the hint of tears visible in his eyes. "I know how I must sound to you now, but can you imagine loosing everything? I... it had to be done. These men had to die, they had to pay for what they did"

"Philip... I don't know what to say...", Richard mumbled, putting a hand on his friends shoulder. "I am sorry for your loss. I understand you. If someone would kill Jenna... I honestly don't know what I would do. I think I would kill whoever did it. But afterwards... how have you managed to carry on?"

Philip shrugged, shaking Richard's hand off in the process. "I have no idea. There are days where I miss them more than you can imagine. My daughter's laughter, my wife's sweet voice...", he mumbled, pausing for a moment. "For a while, I thought about giving up, you know. Back in these days, after I killed the men who took my family, I couldn't imagine any kind of future for me. But I carried on. For Lilith. For Lana. I build a new life, as far away from the North as possible. Not with a new family, but with friends. With you, Urid, Lyria and Rosie..." He paused as his voice slightly cracked. "And now it happens again"

Richard let out a sigh as he finally understood Philip's behaviour over the past days. "I am sorry for what happened today, what I did", he muttered a weak apology. "I lead you into this warehouse, into this ambush. We're no fighters and yet I treated us as such. If you hate me now, I can..."

"Hating you?", Philip cut him off with a low, aggressive voice. "Hating you? Richard, perhaps you are partially to blame for what happened today. But what kind of person would blame you for it? For what these... these monsters did? Never could I hate you. You are my best friend!" After almost yelling these last words, he lowered his voice again. "After today, you are perhaps the only friend I have left"

His voice sounded just like Richard felt at the moment. Desperate. "I...", he stuttered, before he cut himself off, burying his face in his hands. He started to weep and he felt weak, terribly weak. In moments like this, he missed his wife the most. Erna had always been his rock in situations like this. "If you don't hate me, then you are a better man than me. I lead my friends into this ambush. I almost killed Urid and... Philip, I am sorry for the sadness I caused"

"Sadness?", Philip growled. "I am not sad, Richard. Back when my family got killed, I was broken. Do you remember the pain when you lost Erna? Now imagine loosing Jenna too on the same day, not even knowing if she had a quick death or if she... This is sadness. But I survived it. I carried on. Now, in my new life, I don't feel this kind of sadness anymore. What I feel is anger"

He looked at Richard and the glare in his eyes made him shiver. "I am angry, not at you, but at the beast that attacked Jenna. At that monster that put an arrow through your leg. At this woman that almost killed Urid today. I am angry at the men who hurt the people I care for", he said with a vicious tone in his voice. "And I won't allow them to do it ever again. I feel no sadness, only burning anger. After today, with Lyria, Rosie, Urid, they made it personal" Finally, the anger faded from his eyes, although a glimmer of it remained, lingering deep inside them. "I want to stop these people, more than ever. I have no intentions of giving up. I want to stop them from hurting anyone else, ever again", he explained, before he let out a sigh. "And I want revenge. But... Richard, I don't think I can do this alone"

"You want to continue?", Richard asked, not sure if he should support his friend, or talk him out of it. Philip gave him a determined nod. "More than ever", he growled. "They are used to be the hunters, but I intend to make them the prey for once. They are wolves, but what they don't understand is, we're no lambs anymore. We're lions"

Richard gave him a nod, feeling the hint of his former determination to return. "But how do you want to do it? We tried to stop them tonight and we failed", he interjected. Philip sighed and looked up to the sky again. "Today, we made a mistake, but they made one as well. They made it personal", he explained. "I don't know how we can stop them, but I know that I have no intentions to give up now. We have to continue and we have to make it better this time. You and me both know, the city guard won't get them. I can't just stop and hide, just lock myself in my room and try to survive. People are dying on the streets, our friends are dying! I can't do nothing, so please don't ask of me to leave them be, not while they are still a danger to the people I care for"

The look in his eyes mirrored how Richard felt himself. He still had this image in his head, of Jenna, after he saved her life. She was so frail, so thin, so pale, his only daughter. And Rosalie, back in Mathea's house, more dead than alive. And Urid... Richard couldn't deny it, he wanted revenge. The thought of giving up, of letting these assassins do whatever they wanted to, it was horrible. But he also had to think about what Philip said earlier, the other horrible thought. If he would continue to try his best to stop these assassins, there was a high chance that he would die, that Philip would die and that Jenna would be all alone in this world. But would it be safer to stay out of this entirely? To leave this town to the wolves? And finally, he wasn't even sure if he would manage to succeed in talking Philip out of his plans...

[Try to talk him out of it]

And with this part, you have reached the end of the current document! The chapter is not yet over, but sadly, the length limitations of Google Documents forced me to create another document to contain the rest of this chapter.

Thank you very much for reading so far. I hope you have enjoyed the story. You can find the next document, containing the rest of Chapter 5 and Act 2, under the following link:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JsAGE4wv4gqyqXAub5-aqcQlOlPdq9kk79WOWiiQE60/edit?usp=sharing>