

## Harlan Prologue

“When you wake each morning, who is first to greet you?

Sol.

The sun. He illuminates and reveals all. He gives order to the time that carries our lives away. By his light, all grows. By his sight, all is known.

When drought has killed your crops and thirst grips your throat, who do you call upon?

Elo.

Water. She quenches all doubts. Streams may dry, wells may fail, but all things return to Elo in time, and she returns them in kind.

When the day burns hot, or your sails hang dead upon the mast, who hears your plea?

Omen.

Air. She whispers from the moon and cools the brow. She carries pollen to the fields, birds to the sky, and thoughts where feet cannot go. She is change, and she is promise.

And when your legs fail you, when you cannot rise, who holds you still?

Erd.

Earth. The ground beneath us is stronger than you can imagine. Look south and see him tower like a giant, stone upon stone. Dozens of his soldiers hold court above our own. Travel north, and he protects us from foul lands and fouler peoples.

These are the Makers Gifts.

They do not bid us to command them.

They do not bow to crowns.

You may think we rule these gifts as kings of the land.

You may be a fool as well.

Without them, there is no land to rule, no thirst to quench, no winds to change, no mountain to climb.

Let the Makers Gifts rule supreme, for only through them can peace endure.”

Harlan had heard these words before, as everyone had. They always sounded better when spoken from marble steps, with guards at your back and bread in your belly. As far as he was concerned, peace was a word for men with walls. They say the gifts do not bow to kings, but they never say kings won't try.

The priest continued.

“Allow me to take you back just over 100 years ago, to King Raelman's coronation. The realm still freshly wounded, just 60 years after conquest. The people of the realm were heartbroken after the rapid demise of not one but two young kings. The lords paramount prepared to strike at each other's throats in pursuit of power.

Our Makers sent us a message in the form of man, arriving from the fog of Spearspoint. Chosen by both Makers and men alike, he waited patiently for every last lord, large and small, to arrive at the capital. He gathered the city residents, rich and poor, peasant and puissant, from every walk of life. He drew them all to the very steps I stand on today, the Great Sept of Sol, and proved to them all that the Makers had foreseen his reign.

When Raelman raised his hands the *world* went dark, and the sun had vanished. Hundreds who witnessed this miracle were blinded at the sight, but every single record recounts the same truth. Sol himself bent the knee to our new king that day, and men promptly followed suit. For centuries the realm had not seen a period of peace last nearly as long since Raelmen's coronation.

A man that was never born to rule, never taught to be a king, and never imagined that he may one day sit the throne. But he was the right man, the only man worthy. The Makers light the way, and man must follow”

Harlan had heard enough. As he pushed his way through the crowd forming at the steps of the Sept, he replayed the words of the sermon in his mind, and they chilled him to the bone. The true meaning behind those prayers were plain as day to him. These streets could be running red by night's end.

As he made his way through the cobbled streets he studied the city walls. Stone upon stone, a thousand shades of grey, they stood 25 feet tall in the center of the river fork. The soaring, spindly towers of the Candlelight Keep loomed large over the city, casting its shadows in the afternoon sunlight. They rose over 80 feet tall, poking out from above the castle's own interior walls. The fires burning atop those three high towers had been burning since the castle was built.

The city's streets bustled with life and the smells filled Harlan's senses. Each street was a unique mix. Woodsmoke dominated one alley, mingling with fish frying in hot peppers and mutton crackling over an open flame. And the next would smell of dung and the acidic rot of a tannery. Above all you could smell the oil and pitch from the ever-burning flames on top of the fire towers spread throughout the whole city.

He made his way through wide streets and tight alleyways. Before the last two weeks, Harlan had not been in this city since he was just a boy of fifteen. While some of the buildings had changed names and owners, the streets had all stayed the same. By this point in his walk the roads had changed from neat cobblestone to packed dirt, and the stench from the drainage ditches had grown considerably stronger. Harlan spotted the tavern he was looking for. A short and squat building with a thatch roof and a weathered wooden sign with a faded and cracked painting of a black dog hung over the door frame.

As he ducked into the tavern his pale grey eyes quickly scanned the room, and found his two friends in a candle lit corner. They were the strangest thing about him, those eyes. Too light for his olive skin and dark hair. People usually noticed them before they noticed anything else. It was not crowded, but enough people were drinking and chatting that Harlan knew they could have their conversation in peace. He made his way to them and ordered an ale. It was stale and bitter, but sweet relief from the taste this day had left in his mouth.

“Bad news my friends.” Harlan said in a hushed voice. “We must abandon our plans. Something big is occurring, we will leave the city by nightfall.”

“Abandon our plans? Are you sick in the head?” The big one snapped.

“No, I'd simply like to keep my head”

“Pray, enlighten us.” said the black haired one.

Harlan took a deep drink from his cup. “I spoke with Kurt, the majority of the City Guard has been pulled from the street, to the keep, himself included. We will have no help from him now. I checked the walls as I walked here. No men were posted on half the gates I passed. Something is amiss.”

Milo slammed his cup on the table. “You tell me there's less guards about, yet you are calling us off? You're a bigger fool than I took you for Harlan.” He growled.

“Aye, he is right.” Taurus added. “We never needed help from Kurt anyways, and more profit for our pockets. You haven't gone soft now have you Perish?”

“Quiet with that name. That is not all. Rumor is that Corren left the city two nights ago. Marken was seen riding south with his men this very morning. The young prince Aemen is the only one left in the capital.”

“Not the only one, Elric is still in the city right?” Taurus asked

“Only a boy, and now a hostage in all but name.” Harlan shot back

“Say it plainly, Harlan.” Milo muttered

“Everyone knows the City Guards are in Aemen’s back pocket. He has kept them paid, and generously these last few years. We know Marken is just a drunk fool. But how he managed to outmaneuver Corren, I cannot say.”

“But...what you’re saying, that must mean-”

“Aye.” Harlan said “The King is dead, or close enough to it, and our crown prince is on the move. A war is brewing, boys. Kurt’s information, and the sermon has made it clear.”

“The sermon, the sermon.” Taurus mocked with a sly grin. “Have the Makers themselves spoken to you? Rumors and a lazy guard have spooked you, alright, but a sermon has sent you running and claiming the king is dead?”

“They spoke of Raelmen’s ascension. ‘Chosen by Makers and men alike’ they said. Aemen must have the priests working in his favor as well.”

“That is a far jump to make, Harlan. Perhaps you have lost your edge. ” Taurus said with a smirk. “One sermon makes you believe the throne is being usurped. That is ridiculous.”

“Forget that! For weeks we have plotted to rob those bastard jewelers.” Milo said angrily. “For weeks we’ve bled coin in this depressing, shit smelling city. Now we are one day from making it worthwhile and you want to pack and run. Go fuck yourself friend.”

Harlan knew his band of thieves would not give up their plans easily, as they had proven here. Between them, coin was running thin and this plot had been their boldest one yet. They had planned to make out with enough jewels to fund them for months. But he knew they would listen to him. They were his brothers.

“Aye, this city does smell of shit, so let’s make our exit quickly.” Harlan joked.

“He may be a fool Harlan, but he’s right again, if the princes have fled as you say, what danger is left?” Taurus said as he pushed his ink black hair from his eyes. “Let them squabble over a crown, and we can make our move tomorrow while the city is distracted.”

Harlan shook his head, his loosely braided dark brown hair swaying on his back. “Just because the crown prince has left, doesn't mean his men have. The lords of The Fork could be making way for siege as we speak. We have no idea where loyalty lies. It is simply too risky. I have let Kurt know he is still welcome to join us. We leave tonight, cross the river to the west, and ride hard for Dunham, he will meet us there as we plan our next move.”

Milo's chair scraped back hard against the floor as he rose, broad enough to block the candlelight from the table behind him. His face was red with anger.

“Bullshit, we will starve.”

Harlan flashed him a disarming smile, mischief playing across his pale eyes. “No Milo, we will rob them tonight.”

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## **GODRY PROLOGUE.**

He awoke to the creaking of the old wooden ladder that led to his humble loft above the stables.

“Who's there?” Godry called, still half asleep.

The light from a lantern was throwing wild shadows across the loft as Godry's eyes adjusted to the dark room. The ladder continued to squeal, and the light shone brighter with each passing second. Godry's eyes grew wide with fear. He collected himself as best he could, and rose to his feet. Godry was born in the shadow of Candlelight Keep, same as his father, and his father's father before him. He had been woken in the dark of night many times, but they had never snuck into his room. He grabbed the small knife he kept beside his bed. He had never used it before, but this was his loft, and he did not plan to die peacefully tonight. As the flame of the lantern inched closer, and the wooden ladder screamed louder, Godry's knuckles grew white over his knife as his eyes squinted through the blinding light.

“Makers have mercy, Ser Rodrick. I thought you for a thief, or worse.” Godry exhaled as he set his knife down. “You have need for a horse?”

“Twenty. Get dressed, and come down.”

“Twenty horses? I will wake a few others, we will make quick work of it”

“No.” Ser Rodrick replied. “I will assist you with the saddling, we will make do.”

A dozen questions popped in Godrys mind, but he knew better than to ask any of them. He pulled on his roughspun clothes and his worn boots before following Rodrick down into the stables. As Godry made his way down he noticed there was a score of men stirring outside.

“Godry, how long will it take us to saddle twenty horses?” Ser Rodrick asked

“Me and you, Ser? Forty minutes to an hour. Maybe less if the horses cooperate.”

“Too long. I will get a few more men. Work as quick as you can, and start with that one.” Ser Rodrick said as he pointed. “I will be back shortly.”

Godry followed his finger to a large courser with a coat of midnight black. Godry knew who this horse belonged to, Corren Forten, the crown prince of Dawn. He had known Corren since the prince was just a boy. He had saddled this horse for him a hundred times. But never at this hour, after a knight crept into his loft.

“Yes, Ser”

He moved over to Flint, ran a comforting hand down his neck and threw a blanket over his back. Godry crossed the room to grab a carrot and Corren's saddle. As he set the saddle down and fed Flint the carrot, he began hearing two men's voices drifting through the room from the small entry hall next to Flint's stall.

“... Alexander, Foster, Hairiton, and Caldwell, all of The Fork is lost to us.”

“We do not know that yet, Your Grace”

“I know enough. That backstabber has been building this for years, while I was busy playing commander in Mora.”

“We can bring House Pereira to our cause, they have always been loyal to the crown.”

“Bearon Pereira cares about winning, not loyalty, he will need to be sure of success before committing to a cause.”

“Maybe I could recruit my cousin to our side, though it will not be easy, Your Grace.”

“Aubrey Redwood is fresh out of boyhood, still green. Besides, we have no safe passage through Grey Gate. The Trenton’s may be my mothers family, but Aemen holds Lord Arrick's granddaughter, Amelia. Even if he wanted to, he is too wise to be seen aiding me while she is still in Dawn.”

“Then we must consider other possibilities, Your Grace.”

“Has there been any word about House Durias or the Holloways?”

Godry recognized these voices, and he knew he should not keep listening. But still, he perked his ears up as he fumbled for the saddle in the dancing lantern light.

“None that I know of, they should be our first stops before going to Spearspoint.”

“The Roscenas will raise their armies, try to name Marken king, I have no doubt. They did not marry Lady Sera to a prince without reason. Between them and the Pereira’s, the south will be lost to us.”

“Yes, but how long can we truly expect them to back a fool?”

“As long as they can. My brother could win a man’s trust, his horse, and his sword before their first cup was empty. Shame he never figured out what to do with any of it. Though I'm sure Aldovar will have no trouble handling that.”

“Unfortunately, the Hardwicks will be quick to join their strength with them.”

“Do you think I'm not aware of that, Edmund?”

“My apologies. The Holloway’s will want a deal. If we can convince Percival to give them tax free passage through Holdenport, they could still be ours.

“Yes, they could prove to be important. But Lionel Durias will be crucial to our cause, without his men we can not hope to hold The Arm for longer than a fortnight.”

*Raise armies? Hold The Arm?* This midnight call was starting to become a bit more clear to Godry. He had known King Deamen was sick and growing more ill with each passing day. But Corren was the crown prince, and he of all people should stay in the capital if there was any talk

of rebellion. He finished saddling Flint and moved to the horse in the next stall, a grey dappled palfrey.

“Your Grace, House Durias has learned its lessons the hard way, I do not doubt they will take your side.”

“The only lesson they might have learned is to back the winning side next time, Edmund. I fear we are moving too late.”

“And if we rally no support, what might our plans be then?”

“West. Mercenaries have no morals, loyalty, or honor, but they will be quick to jump at the sound of gold, and that we will have plenty.”

“Your Grace, it might be best if we stay in Holdenport if that is the case, The Hand is impregnable. We c- “

“I do not plan to starve in a siege, Edmund. If I know my brother, as long as he believes I am in exile, my family will be safe.”

*Exile? What in The Makers wide world are they saying?* Before Godry could piece it together Ser Rodrick came bustling through the entrance with four other men, all knights, all dressed in chain mail and dark, hooded riding cloaks. They all held steel on their hips as well.

“Hurry your ass up Godry, we do not have all night.” Ser Rodrick snapped as the men all started saddling their own horses.

“Sorry, Ser, I was slow to wake.” Godry replied

He hurriedly tightened the girth on the palfrey and moved swiftly to the next stall. Godry always felt in his element in these stables. Even in the dark he knew where all the tack was, and how to calm each horse. He had saddled five horses before the knights had done that much between themselves. And in twenty short minutes, all the horses had been saddled, fed, and watered. He was confident they were prepared for whatever journey they might have in front of them.

“Thank you, Godry. You may return to your bed now, but I will ask that you don’t breathe a word of this to anyone.” Ser Rodrick said

“Of course, Ser”

Godry started to make his way toward the old wooden ladder, and back to his normal night.

“Godry, could I ask one more thing of you?” a familiar deep voice said

Godry turned to see Corren, the crown prince addressing him. Godry was a tall man, and stood just above eye level with the prince. But Corren was as wide as two of him, and thick with cords of muscle. His hair was brown, cropped closely to his head, and his beard was full and neatly kept. He wore a black leather jerkin, and a dark green cloak that appeared almost black in the low light. His eyes flashed the same color as the cloak, but the flickering flame caught them, and made the dark green look almost as bright as his brothers. Across his back was a large war hammer, forged of blackened steel, with a worn ash handle wrapped in dark leathers. Beside him was Edmund Redwood. The oldest of the kingsguard, grizzled and grey haired. He had one eye, losing it in a tourney from a stray splintered lance over thirty years ago. In public he wore a glass eye, and at first glance it was tough to notice, but up close you could see it was dull and did not ever move. He often complained of its discomfort, and recently started wearing it only in court. Tonight he was wearing an eye patch, brown leather strapped across his face, along with the same chainmail and a dark riding cloak as the rest of the men.

“M’Lord Prince, Ser Edmund, how can I assist you?”

“Walk with me a moment.” Corren said

“Yes, m’lord”

Corren walked him into the same small entry hall that Godry had heard him speaking in before.

“Thank you for your service tonight. I will be leaving indefinitely. Thank you for caring for my horses all these years, I will struggle to find a groom half as gifted as you.”

“My Lord Prince, if you are leaving, let me ride with you, I would be honored to continue in your service.” Godry said.

“No. Your duty is here.” Corren replied. “I face perilous times, I fear. I could not call myself honorable if I asked you to risk your life for me.”

“M-my life, m’lord?”

“Yes, and that is the true reason I asked to speak with you. You will be questioned about tonight. Answer any questions they ask truthfully. Do not withhold any information you might have. It

may not be tomorrow, or the next day, but they will come. Promise me you will not place yourself in danger on my behalf.”

Again, Godry knew better than to ask any questions, and he feared he knew the answer already, but this time he could not refrain.

“Who will question me, m’lord?”

“My sweet brother Aemen. Now promise me.”

“I promise you, m’lord.”

“Very well, I must be off then.”

## **Chapter 1. Marken**

Marken awoke with a splitting headache, the taste of last night’s drink still sharp in the back of his throat, and the feeling of cool steel pressed against his neck. And his brother Aemen, giving him a smile just as cold and sharp as the dagger on his throat. With tired eyes, he studied the man holding the knife and his life in his hands. *Cade Caldwell. In kingsguard armor no less. Silver plate armour with intricate black inlay, trailed by a bright red cloak, for the original colors of House Forten. No doubt naming him was Aemen’s payment for his father’s fealty. A third son in the kingsguard. A measly price to forget your vows.*

“Father has finally passed on then brother?”

“Yes, in the early hours of the dawn. He went peacefully.” Aemen said calmly, still smiling. “It’s a shame you couldn’t be there in his final moments.”

Aemen flipped his own dagger in his hand. A short, sharp blade, masterfully crafted, its hilt studded with bright green jade, matching the color of Aemen’s piercing eyes. He tucked it back into his belt. He wore a silk doublet of deep black, heavily embroidered with golden thread, and a cloth of gold cloak. His long platinum blonde hair was styled in a single tight braid down his back. *All that’s missing is the crown brother.*

“I’m sure you understand the meaning of this visit.” Aemen said.

“You mean to kill me?”

“Please. If I truly wanted to kill you, do you really believe we would be talking right now? To be named a kinslayer for the likes of you? No. You’re no threat. Corren on the other hand, well he was smart enough to see his way out a few nights past, in the cover of darkness. I know that hurt his pride. Did you even notice he left the city?”

Marken tried to casually sit up, but was swiftly pushed back down by Cade, blade still at his throat.

“I see you brought some wine. How thoughtful of you little brother. I might speak easier with a cup by my mouth and this knife off my neck.”

Aemen nodded and Cade withdrew the blade, his cool blue eyes burning into Marken’s black ones. *This one is determined.* Marken rose and filled a cup with the fine, Verona red and drained half of it in a single gulp. It was heady, with an intoxicating aroma of berries and spice. *He even brought my favorite wine.*

“Of course I knew he left. I figured I had more time.” Marken answered with a shrug.

He finished off his wine, and poured another cup.

“Typical.” Aemen said with a smirk “Sitting idly by while opportunity passes you. Another week of wallowing in your cups, in this ...servants quarters you call a chamber would not have stopped my ascension though.”

Marken looked at his brother. The long tight braid down his back. The cloth of gold. The jade laced dagger. He felt a slight rush of anger flush in his cheeks. He had seen this coming for three years and was still woken up with a dagger at his throat. *At least I can't be played for a fool if I truly am one.*

“Gold well spent, I hope.”

“You would do well to hold your tongue in front of your new king.” Aemen said coolly. “I harbor no hatred for you brother. Truth be told, I find you quite amusing. But your claim is too strong to allow you to stay at my court. I will let you leave, brother, but quickly or I may have to kill you yet. I will not be made to look weak.”

Marken took a few sips of wine, savoring it, and then slowly drained his second cup. He ran his fingers through his short blonde hair, the pounding in his head beginning to recede. He knew this

day was coming, but this upjumped young knight threatening his life had been quite unexpected and jarring. *Surely Aemen's idea of an insult.* The Caldwell boy had won some small fame in Marken's own nameday tournament just the previous year, placing third in the joust, as well as the melee. But the Caldwells, although an ancient house, and a proud one, were just a minor player among the river lords.

"Am I to be exiled then?"

"No, I will allow you to retreat to Ohrello. I'm sure the Roscenas will push you to press your claim. They will call their banners, and gather their armies. It makes no difference to me. You are not fit to rule. The realm knows just as well as you and I." Aemen said, pacing the room. "Drink your days away there, for all I care. If you and Aldo choose to march on me, it will simply give me an opportunity to display the crown's strength. Corren will find nothing in the north but disappointment in his precious duty. I'm quite sure my offers are better. And Pereira." He smiled. "Well, you know Pereira."

*He is confident. He wants me to rise against him, all so he can strike me down.*

Marken flashed his own smile at them. "Is this your new sworn sword? Bold choice, Aemen, young, untested, but I approve. You will make your family proud, Ser, I am sure it's already paying dividends."

Marken studied the new kingsguard, hoping his jab would land. Cade's face showed no change, as he stood silent, resolve carved into his features. *Disappointing. But is he dull or dumb?*

"His first day on the job, an eventful one at that. I do not doubt he will prove his worth in the months to come. A sharp mind and a sharper sword, with ambition to match my own. I chose him over my other new kingsguard, the big brute Walton sent me. His third son, Liam. A few other well placed promises won him over mere weeks ago. Although I always knew he would join my side eventually, he wants to win of course. Lucian on the other hand, well just a bit of attention and a promise to keep him as my Hand, won me all of House Foster with ease." Aemen said casually.

Marken was growing weary of his brother's boasts. He dressed in fine wool, and fastened his favorite fur trimmed cloak with a silver spear and shield brooch, and pulled on his fine leather boots. He picked up his sword belt and held it out toward Aemen.

"I imagine you will want Scarlet Night. It will soon be yours by right, after all. And a fine blade to display at your crowning."

Aemen dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "Keep your ancient sword brother. I have no need of a blade to prove my legitimacy. Every lord in a hundred leagues is behind me, that will be proof enough."

Marken fastened on his swordbelt and rested his hand upon the hilt. The red rubies and black diamonds danced in the morning light that poured through the window. He noticed Cade's hand instinctively moved to his sword as well.

"Relax, Ser. I am sure you would not hesitate cut me down if I was fool enough to draw this blade"

"Enough of this Marken, you and all of your wife's men will vacate the castle within the day, or you will all be put to the sword. My coronation will be at first light the day after next."

Marken filled himself his third cup of wine.

"Very well. And what of Elric." He asked before taking a sip.

"Elric will stay here with me, I see no need to involve him in our quarrels. He will train, study, and learn to rule. One day, he will make a fine Hand." Aemen said. "A promising young lad. I mean to see that promise through."

"And if he wishes to leave?" Marken asked.

"He will have no desire to leave." Aemen replied. "I hold his trust, and the boy loves me, truly. I intend to keep it that way."

Marken was not surprised by his brother's answer, but still disappointed.

"He is a good boy. Better than either of us deserves as a brother."

He finished his wine with a few last gulps, and set down his cup. He left without paying either man another glance.

While making his way through the cold, stone corridors, he reflected on all the mistakes, all the missed opportunities, and all the bitter thoughts that came with them. *How have I found myself here?* He wondered if this would be his last look at home. He was certain it would be for a long time.

He shook those thoughts from his head as best he could. This morning had brought him enough trouble, and not nearly enough wine. He knew he had to gather up his men, and prepare them to leave. Well, as Aemen pointed out, his wife's men. Two years had passed since he rode with her to Ohrello, for her father's funeral. He rode back with these men. Alone. Sera had decided to stay in her family's keep, now ruled by her brother. She had grown tired of waking alone, and when he did make it back to their chambers, the bitter stench that followed him. He didn't blame her.

As he made his way down the steep stone steps, the familiar smells hit him all at once. Fresh bread being pulled from the ovens, boiled eggs, bacon sizzling on the fire. The castle's stomach growling, same as any morning. He chose to make his chambers far away from the royal wing, above the kitchens. It was warm, smelled better than any other part of the castle, and his servants never had to go far for wine.

He made his way past the kitchens and past the narrow stairway that lead to the top of the famous firetowers of Candlelight Keep. As he approached the great hall, its carved, dark walnut, double doors were propped open. He stopped to soak it in. The tapestries on the wall illustrated some of the most important moments in Forten history. Marken's favorite was always The Shield and The Spear. It depicted The Battle of Mud and Fog, a famous Forten battle that happened almost 150 years ago. King Tyson had died on that field, fighting beside his brother Raymen. They fought together, against the first rebellion since their father Tybull landed, and conquered. A new king was named that day as well.

Marken took one last look and walked away, he knew exactly where he'd find his men. As he stepped into the training yard he was greeted by the ringing of steel on steel. After a brief scan of the yard, he quickly spotted four of his knights. In total he kept a small group of nine knights, eight of them were sent with him by Lady Roscena those years ago, tasked with keeping him breathing and out of serious trouble. Marken suspected it was the least enviable assignment of all the Roscena men. The ninth was a hedge knight he picked up just last year, at the very same tourney he met Cade Caldwell. He was the closest thing Marken had to a friend. But Marken suspected he liked him less for his company, and more for the free drinks. His hedge knight, Cortland, was training with Ser Arthur Brimsby, the effective captain of his wife's men, and two more of his guards. Marken made his way through a maze of squires and knights at their morning drills, a few off duty City Guards breaking their fast on the stone steps, and a tall stable hand leading a horse across the yard. After a moment he finally caught the attention of his companions and called them over.

"Ser Cort!" Marken called "Pack your things, we are bringing these men home. We shall depart within an hour."

Ser Arthur perked up at the sound of home. “My lord, excuse my insolence, but does this mean the rumors we’ve heard are true?”

“I have no time to discuss rumors with you, Ser Arthur. I will fill you in on the details once we begin riding. Find the rest of our men and meet me at the western river gate in one hour. Leave nothing behind, we won’t be returning any time soon.”

“Yes, my lord. The men will be happy.” Ser Arthur said with a small grin

Ser Arthur and his wife’s men quickly gathered their things and started off back to the castle. They held no love for him, and Marken suspected they all laughed in their cups at the prince they were sent to Dawnseye with. But a prince was a prince, even a sorry one, and they must respect him as such. Marken knew these Roscena men were pleased to be going back home to Ohrello after more than two years away. They each had families of their own they were eager to get back to. *They are probably more pleased just to be ending their service to me.*

“Cortland, I will need you to get a few servants and pack my belongings.” Marken said “My wine stores first, only the best bottles, I trust you know my taste by now. My traveling clothes, my signet ring, a few of the good doublets, and my best cloak, you know the one. Oh, and the cedar chest at the foot of my bed, do not open it, just be sure to bring it. Leave the rest.”

“Yes m’lord. Will we be riding hard straight to Ohrello?” Cortland asked with a devilish grin

“No, Cort. We will stop in Dunham and take a few rooms at the inn there. One last night of some comfort, and plenty of drink to go around. After that, it will be hard riding for a few weeks.”

“And m’lord, what of my things?” Ser Cortland asked

“Do not worry, I will send a servant to your chambers. If you desire, take some clothes from my closets for your own. Though, nothing that would make you better dressed than your lord, Ser.” Marken said with a wry grin on his lips.

“Thank you m’lord. Might I ask where you are going?”

“No. For I have one more stop to make.”

## **Chapter 2. Corren**

As they ran out of day, the outline of Elders Keep stood stoically in the distance. A grey overcast had plastered the sky all day and the rain had been pounding on them for the past few hours, soaking them all to the bone. Corren reined up on his horse and looked back to his group of men that had risked everything to ride with him. Two had been Kingsguard, both sworn to his father and now to him. Ser Edmund Redwood, and Ser Robert Moss. He had ventured into worse situations, with worse men. But he couldn't say he had ever ridden into anything with better men. Robert had grown up as a Forten ward, sent to be raised in the Candlelight Keep. Their friendship was forged in the training yard, both fierce competitors. Ser Edmund was a fresh Kingsguard when Robert first came, still a boy himself, and the youngest Kingsguard ever named. He quickly took both boys under his wing. He had knighted them both when they turned sixteen, and the same year convinced Corren's father to appoint Robert to the Kingsguard, after old Ser Arstan passed those years ago. Just under a year had passed since they returned from the war in the western kingdom of Mora. More specifically, they were defending Mora under the orders and funding from Percival Holden. Holdenport and Mora had dominated the Meloret Straight for almost 500 years. Each collecting more gold in trade taxes alone than the rest of the western kingdoms combined. Those four years were the first taste of real battle that Corren and Robert ever had. Edmund fought with them side by side, demonstrating everything he had ever taught them, and even some he had not. When the war came to an end, and their swords had drunk their fill of blood, they had developed a reputation. Brutal and decisive victories. *A better brother and a better father than my true blood.* Twenty others had joined him on this journey, while another thirty had lingered behind on his orders. He had hoped they could gather a bit more information before slipping out of the capital, but as each day passed he was less sure that any more were coming. Only nineteen of the expected thirty had caught up with them since, and none had learned much of value to him. They had been riding for six days now, and in the morning a quick ride would find them outside Lionel Durias' castle.

“Ser Edmund, Ser Robert.” Corren called. “We will make camp here for the night. Send two scouts behind us, search for any of our men coming in, and make sure we're not being followed. Send Rodrick ahead, to tell Durias of our coming.”

Edmund was quick to find the two best riders in their outfit and send them back. They had passed through Aims just two days before, and any men still making their way from Dawnseye should be there by the time the scouts arrived. *Makers know we need each one.* Corren's squire had gotten his tent up, a young lad named Finn. He was born in Spearspoint, the son of a soldier, and he was trained from birth to be the same. Corren handpicked him himself to be his squire, before departing west. At just 11 years old he went to war with them and proved his mettle on many occasions. Corren strode into his tent, a large pavilion. A fire had already been started and hippocras was already heating over the brazier. The smell of woodsmoke was heavy, but the cinnamon and ginger cut through, with a sweet hint of honey. He changed from his soaked riding clothes into fresh wools, a needed relief from days on the road.

“Finn, bring Ser Edmund and Ser Robert in, we have much to discuss. We will need some food. Hard cheese, brown bread, and the last of blood sausages will do.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Finn said before ducking out of the tent.

Corren moved to the brazier, poured himself a cup, and let the warmth work back into his bones. He had been mulling on tomorrow's meeting for the last six days. But at this moment, he found peace listening to the rhythm of the rain drum onto the top of the tent, and the wind whistling outside. Edmund and Robert filed in quietly, trailed by Finn with their food. Edmund took the hard stool close to the brazier as he always did, and Robert grabbed his own cup of the spiced wine and took his seat on the sprawling bear pelt on the floor.

“Is the wine to your liking, Your Grace?” Finn asked

“Yes boy, fine cup, well spiced. You may take your leave now.” Corren said

Finn gave a stiff nod and made his way out.

“You should let the boy stay Corren, he has done damn near enough to get knighted, let alone join our talks.” Robert quipped

“Not this one.” Corren gruffed “Tomorrow will tell us if we can hold at Spearspoint, or need to retreat further. We need these men if we are to have a true cause, or a lost one.”

Edmund shifted forward in his stool, casting a flickering shadow across the room. “Your Grace, we must consider our options if this meeting does not go as well as we might hope.”

“Options? I have no options. I have my birthright, and my honor.” Corren said as anger flashed in his dark green eyes. “What else does a man have? It is my duty to rule this kingdom. My father's kingdom. I brought you in to discuss strategies, Edmund, not options.”

“Nobody can deny you're the rightful king, Corren. Lionel will not deny this fact either. But what is more important is what we can offer him.” Robert said. “Duty does not sway a man as much as it used to. You should be wary of trusting the words of men in times of a crumbling crown. Especially those words that have gone stale and brittle. Lionel is not a man known for duty either. Greed drives a Durias, as most men nowadays. They will follow what benefits them, and they all seem to benefit greatly from your brother.”

*To think I'm bribing my subjects for my own kingdom back.* It mattered naught now, he knew he could not win them over without a cost. The last few weeks had truly opened his eyes to the lengths Aemen went to tear him down. It was painful to know how cheap some Lords had been bought, and the lengths his brother went to convince the others. But if word was to be believed, House Durias had accepted no terms from the usurper.

“We can offer his heir a seat in our council, Leonard is capable.” Edmund added

“And craven.” Corren spat “But it is a price I am willing to pay.”

“Your Grace, you would do better to hold your tongue in that matter tomorrow.” Edmund said

“They will want more than a simple council seat.” Robert said while nibbling in some hard cheese. “Lands. Now that is what he is truly wanting. I'm sure of it.”

*One Lord wants this, another that. And Aemen keeps them all on his string like puppets, dancing to his tunes.* He let out a deep breath, collecting his thoughts.

“House Wynn. What's the chances we could convince them to join our side?” Corren asked

“Slim to none, Your Grace.” Edmund frowned, rubbing his eyepatch. “Do you suspect Lionel will want a parcel of their lands?”

“They have been bickering over these marshlands for decades at least. More than a parcel, but it may be the cost.”

“Have you considered marriage for Dearen? I'm sure they would be happy to oblige, Leonard does have a daughter of a similar age.” Robert asked while he combed his fingers through his straw colored hair.

“No. It is far too early to be thinking of that. In any case, I would hope we could find a stronger match for him than them.”

“Again, Your Grace, it would be wise to refrain from saying that. I'm sure we can find a better way to get our point across.” Edmund said

Corren rubbed the stress from his temple, this was supposed to be the simpler task on their journey. House Holloway would likely prove to be a greater challenge. But he couldn't find the energy to make any more plans now.

“I have heard enough for tonight. At first light we will make our way to the castle, get your rest, be prepared.”

Edmund and Robert made their way out, eager to find their own warm beds. Corren finished his cup, as well as the remaining food, and laid his head to rest.

He woke to Finn putting fresh wood on the fire. His breakfast had already been prepared as well, a few boiled eggs, and some dried fruit.

“Have any more of our men come during the night?” Corren asked Finn

“No, Your Grace.”

*As I should have expected.* When he stepped outside, the rain had ceased, and the crisp morning air was cool on his skin. The rising sun was cresting over the horizon, as the clouds from last night had finally cleared. Corren observed his men while he broke his fast, hoping to see that Finn might of missed one, to no avail. But the morning had proved to be a beautiful one, and that he could appreciate. Surrounding Elders Keep for miles were beautiful soltara flowers. They stood about two feet tall, on long green stems, with an array of white petals that each faded into deep golds and reds. This morning they were truly dancing in the fields, swaying side to side in the gentle morning breeze. It was said that a thousand years before the Forten conquest, an ancestor of House Durias had danced their soul into these lands, and the flowers would echo that for eternity. It is still said that House Durias carries magic in their blood to this day. Corren did not believe a word of those tales, but he could not deny the beauty of the soltaras and the picture they painted across the landscape.

He was pulled back to reality by Finn leading his horse to him. After the last tent was torn down, Corren mounted Flint and waited for his men to form up behind him. When all was ready he touched his spurs to Flint and began trotting toward the looming castle. While they descended the hill their camp was made on, some of the knights leaned off their horses to pick from the fields of wild flowers. It was not a long ride, in just over two hours they reached the castle gates and were greeted by the guards, donned with yellow and orange surcoats over their chainmail, styled with the blooming flower of House Durias. The portcullis had already been drawn in anticipation of their arrival and the steward was waiting for them.

“My Lord Prince, if you could follow me. Your men are welcome to our hall. There is food and drink for your men, and we shall have quarters ready for them as well.” The steward called out.

“Edmund, Robert, Finn, join me.” Corren said as he dismounted and handed his horse off to a stable hand. The remainder of his men broke off and made their way to the great hall of Elders Keep. They were sure to appreciate a solid roof over their heads, and warm food in their bellies.

“Your Grace, leave the hammer in the stables. It sends the wrong message.” Edmund said quickly

“I’m not sending messages, Edmund. I will speak with my words.” Corren said..

“Please follow me to the solar, Elder Lionel has been eager to treat with you My Lord Pr-”

“It is Your Grace now.” Edmund interjected

“My apologies. The news of your fathers passing has still not set in. It will not happen again, Your Grace.” The steward said.

The remainder of the long walk to the solar was taken in silence. Corren dressed in his red wool doublet, with silver buttons styled as shields, as well as a light black cloak fastened with twin silver spears brooches. His Kingsguard were matching in red gambeson, and short swords at their hip. Finn wore a red surcoat with the silver spear and shield sewn on the front and the bursting sun embroidered on the back. As they approached the solar Corren grew more and more nervous. *Without their men we will be further outmatched then even I could win against. Shove your damned pride down for once.* Two men occupied the solar. Leonard Durias sat near the hearth, a fire crackling beside him. His father was at the far end of the room behind an oak desk, the window open at his back, maps spread on the table between them. He was small in stature, had flowing dark auburn hair just starting to turn grey, and brown eyes speckled with spots of pale green.

“Corren, welcome. Come sit, make yourselves at home. You know my son Leonard.” Lionel said with a smile. “Ser Edmund, nice to see you. Same goes for you Ser Robert. I have not had the pleasure of meeting the boy.”

Corren sat himself at the desk, directly across from Lionel, while Edmund and Robert stayed standing behind.

“My squire, Finn. It’s about time he learned the ways of these things.” Corren said as Finn lingered behind, back to the door.

“We all have much to learn, My Lord.”

“It is Your Grace now, Elder.” Edmund said.

“Yes my mistake, I was very sorry to hear of your father. Makers bless his soul.”

“Thank you, Lionel. Shall we speak about why I have come here to talk to you?” Corren asked

“You would have me pledge my loyalty, in the possibility of a succession war, correct?”

“And what causes you to believe that?” Corren asked as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Well, Your Grace, forgive me for saying this but, one of you is still in the capital. And well, one of you is in my solar. Not to mention the fact Aemen has been quietly gauging our position the last year or so. A few whispered promises as well.” Lionel said with a smirk.

*Did everyone know before I did?* He never imagined it would ever come to this, but it seemed the rest of the kingdom thought it inevitable.

“We hope you have not accepted any offers yet.” Said Robert.

“We have stalled our response for as long as we can, we had hoped to hear from you sooner. You may find yourself too late.” Lionel said as he shuffled some items around his desk. He picked up a small wooden figure, an elegant dancer carved out of black bog oak, and spun it in his hands.

“Yes, we are clearly behind the curve in this matter. But here we are now. What would you have from us Elder?” Edmund said

“How old is Dearen now? He is of age with Leonard's daughter. Might a match be made there?”

*Over my dead body.* Corren cleared his throat and did his best to hide the displeasure written in his face. He forced a small smile into his lips. “Elder, the matter of my son's marriage must be discussed with my wife first. As she is in Holdenport right now, I am in no position to offer his hand. Also, I would prefer he had a say in the matter, so for the moment we must decline.”

“However, we would be glad to offer Leonard a seat in our council, and a tax break from whatever goods you might trade through The Hand.” Edmund added in a hopeful tone.

Lionel stroked his trimmed auburn beard. “Are you sure old Percival is okay with that? Nevertheless, your terms are not quite as generous as your brothers. I do have an idea that might sweeten our agreement a tad.”

“Name your terms, Elder.” Corren said

“Leonard, grab the maps off the table there, you know the one.”

Leonard got up and sifted through a few of the maps on the longtable. When he found the one he was looking for he handed it to Corren for inspection. *Just as we expected.*

“You would have me poison my chances with the Wynns of Stonebrook?”

“Those chances are long dead, Your Grace. The crows have already dined on the eyeballs of that deal.” He set the carved dancer down. “These are my terms, I believe they are simple enough.”

The room was quiet for a moment. Edmund said nothing. Robert said nothing. Corren looked at Lionel and Lionel stared back with the patience of a man who was clearly in no hurry.

“Duty and honor truly are not enough anymore.” Corren said, finally breaking the silence.

“They never were, Your Grace. You simply believed they were. You hold honor and loyalty so near and dear to your heart. Why? Because your scholar told you? Because it was written in the books of history?” Lionel paused for a moment. “The victors don’t write of their misdeeds, nor of the promises they broke along the way. Only their word survives the test of time.”

*He should watch his tongue, that one.* But Corren knew it was his own that should be guarded, he needed these men. “Very well. The marshland, from Aims to Mistmore, while Wynns will keep the Stony Shores for Stonebrook. Coupled with the council seat and the tax relief from Lord Percival.”

“Those arrangements will work for us.” said Lionel with a toothy smile

“I have my own questions regarding your men.” Corren said, relieved to turn the conversation to what he understood best.

“Ask away.” He said as leaned further back into his chair.

“How many men can you call to command, how many are knights, men-at-arms, and how many levies.”

Lionel leaned forward in his chair and rattled off his forces with ease, like he had rehearsed this conversation the night before.

“Just over 3000 men will depart with us then. And you are satisfied with our terms?” Edmund asked.

*A large price for a small army. We need more.* Corren bit his tongue though, it was better than nothing. At least they had gotten to a point in this conversation he could fully understand. *Outmaneuvered and outwitted by an old man and his cowardly son. I've made a bigger fool of myself than they ever could.*

Before Lionel could respond, his son Leonard cleared his throat. “I will also command our men. I know them well, and they will answer to me.” He had stayed silent until this point, but it was clear he was firm on this matter.

*I would wager my 50 could take his 3000 if he's in command.* “As long as you understand that my word is final, My Lord.” Corren said coldly.

You could cut the icy tension in the air with a dagger. Corren had never forgiven Leonard for refusing to cross the Meloret with him

“Of course, Your Grace. Your authority will not be in question.” Leonard said. He was the spitting image of his father, all except a few extra inches in height, a longer beard, and thirty years in age. *A misstep he will come to regret. Men follow leaders, not a face they know. Wait for my moment and let him be the one embarrassed.*

“I believe these are all terms we can agree on.” Edmund said as he clapped his hands. “Let’s call in the steward, get some fine wine, and draw up this agreement.”

“Actually, I have one last request for you, Your Grace.” Lionel said shrewdly

“What might that be?” Corren asked suspiciously

“For my own curiosity, I must know. How did Deamen let it reach this point between you and your brothers? How did he not see this coming and step in?”

“You knew my father, Lionel. Maybe in his younger days he was different. But the man I knew was a scared man. Too afraid to rule his own kingdom. He seldom left his own quarters, he rarely attended councils or court. Aye, he was not lost like his father, nor his namesake. He was lost in mind, and lost in spirit. A broken man.”

“I am sorry you remember him in that light. I did know your father. We were childhood friends, My father served on your grandfather's council, and I spent many days of my youth in Dawn, before well

- I knew Deamen before his father sailed north and vanished. I knew him when the few survivors returned, and word of the horrors they experienced crept across the kingdom. Do not be so hard on him, in fact you remind me much of him, strong and awfully stubborn. I can not say I would have fared much better if I was in his shoes. He kept the king's peace in the realm for almost forty years, despite his own difficulties. Harbor no hatred for him, if not for your sake, for mine.”

*I remind him of my father? I doubt a sword could cut me deeper.* “I will try my best, for your sake, Elder. Though it is him who makes me sit here now, currying favor in my own Kingdom.”

That made Lionel laugh, an unexpected moment for Corren.

“That is what you should have done this whole time, Your Grace, your fault is not seeing that sooner. But as I said, we all have much to learn.” Lionel said with a wink at Finn.

*Is he trying to make a fool of me?* But again Corren bit his tongue. With that said, they called the steward in, drew up the terms of their agreement over a flagon of vintage Verona gold, from Lionel’s personal stores. A few hours, and plenty of specifics later, they retired from the solar.

“Allow Leonard to show you to your quarters. Maybe you can discuss strategies along the way.” Lionel said as they started to leave.

“That is alright, the steward will do. I’m tired, hungry, and a headache is brewing. We will have plenty of time for strategy on the ride to Holloway, we should leave at first light. Leonard, if you could have your men prepared.”

“As you wish, Your Grace. We will be prepared.” Leonard said with a smile

It was a short walk to the quarters, and there was already a fire in the hearth, fresh rushes, a hot meal and a flagon of local wine on the table.

“Edmund, Robert, come in for a quick chat.” Corren said before they went to their own quarters.

“Would you like me to spice and heat the wine, Your Grace.” Finn asked

“No, water will do for me. Tell the servants to heat a bath for me and you may take your leave for the night.” Corren replied

Edmund and Robert came in while Finn left.

“Our hopes may not be lost yet.” Robert said as he poured himself a cup. “If we can bring in the Holloways, and of course the strength of Spearspoint, we may hold The Arm sufficiently.”

“I want to do more than simply hold The Arm, Robert. Even if we can convince Lord Cedric, and that’s a daunting task, we still will need some band of western mercenaries.”

“Let us cross that bridge when we get there. Today was a victory nonetheless. Robert’s right, our cause may not be as lost as we thought.” Edmund said

“Leonard Durias commanding the majority of my men? That is not what I call a victory. I should not have to grovel for his support. By rights, I should not be the one in his solar.”

“No, you should not, Your Grace, but you are. We can not change that now, all we can change is our futures.” Edmund said. “Now excuse me, I’ll need my rest for tomorrow’s venture.”

Edmund left the room swiftly, while Robert lingered behind finishing his wine.

Corren sat studying the floor. He had lived his whole life believing the throne would be his with no contest. He had never considered the possibility that it would be him in these dire circumstances.

“Has my ship sailed, Robert? Is it truly too late?”

Robert sipped his wine, “Things will turn Corren, the realm may be carved to bits by the end. But it will turn.”

Before Corren could respond Robert walked out, cup still in hand. Corren walked to the hot bath, and scrubbed himself clean for the first time in days. He lingered in the tub until the water went cold, and even then, he stayed longer. He had fought with fewer men in many battles, he had won those, and more. His brothers had never fought in any battles, or even a tournament. Yet even knowing that, and the small ‘victory’ that was today, he still felt defeated. He finally managed to lift himself from the cold tub, and wrapped himself in a fur trimmed robe. He knew he needed to eat, and picked at some of the food. A roasted chicken, mashed turnips with butter, and a sweet apple dish with honey, but he suddenly felt the exhaustion of the last few days, and his appetite escaped him. He set the food aside, laid on the warm feather bed, and finally closed his eyes to rest. That night he dreamed of a fleet of ships sailing over the horizon, with the Forten flag waving on their mast.

### Chapter 3. Harlan

The small gang had ridden hard for two hours to reach the Dunham Inn, with its lights shining through the windows onto the dark canvas they emerged from. There were a few other taverns and rooms for purchase in the small town but this one was *the* Dunham Inn, the last stop coming into and leaving the capital. Only two hours had passed since they had committed the robbery, and the adrenaline rush had just barely begun to fade. *Less a robbery, more of a massacre.* Harlan knew the likelihood of blood being spilled was high when they deviated from their original plans, but three men dead, that was more than he bargained for. He had robbed and killed many times before, but tonight was sitting on him heavier than the bag of jewels he now carried. While Harlan reined up his horse, Taurus and Milo had already dismounted and led their horses into the stable. As soon as they were sure nobody was on their tail, they had all stopped by one of the small streams off the path, and cleaned the dried blood off themselves and changed into fresh clothes. They both stood waiting, Milo with a sheepish grin on his face, and Taurus clearly trying to stifle his own smile.

Harlan dismounted and handed his horse off to the stablehand “You two head in and save me a seat, I will find us some warm rooms, and hot meals.”

They both went off laughing and joking with each other like a couple of highborn maids. *We have all killed before. Why should I not enjoy our new found wealth with them?* His coin purse was considerably heavier than it was this morning, courtesy of the merchants, so he dumped a handful of coppers in the groom's hand and told him to feed the horses well tonight. While he handed off the coin, he noticed he still had blood under his fingernails, dried and brown now.

The Inn was lively tonight, bustling with regulars, travelers, and shady figures all around. A pair of hooded figures stood at the bar, as well as a few others. A group of knights were playing cards at a corner table, loud and drunk. A singer was singing a catchy song with a dozen men singing along. He squeezed through the crowded tables and drunken laughter before making it to the bar, having to shoulder a few people out of his way. He was broad but lean, the kind of muscle that didn't announce itself until it was needed. He took a harder look at the hooded pair, their cloaks were well made, swords at their hip, and there was a third man who appeared to be with them. He was shorter than the pair, and thinner, with a pug face, but his clothes were equally well made, with a black leather cloak with silver thread. While the other two were deeply drunk, one giggling in their cups and making bawdy jests to a barmaid, and the other looked like he was barely hanging onto his stool, the pug faced man seemed alert, his back to the bar, constantly scanning the room, hand never far from his hilt. *And who are you protecting, Ser? Some lords son most like.*

Harlan caught the attention of the innkeep with the flash of a smile and a silver coin.

“Three of your best rooms. Three roasted chickens, with whatever bread you have. And a couple flagons of your best drink.”

“Only got two rooms left, wouldn’t call them our best. And we don’t got no chickens. We got brown beef stew, in a trencher of stale bread. Best mead this side of The Vermelo though.”

*It’ll have to make do.* He tossed her the silver and still got back a couple of coppers. It had been a while since Harlan had a silver to spend, and that made tonight’s chaos a bit more manageable. Holding a flagon in both hands he spotted his crew in a low lit booth in the back of the room. If he wanted to sleep well tonight he was sure he would need to take down one of them all by himself. He made sure the innkeep knew where to send the trenchers and made his way over to the shady booth.

“Drink up boys, we’ve earned it.” Harlan said while sliding in next to Taurus. Milo was wide enough to take up nearly his whole side of the booth.

“Damned right we did.” Milo laughed. “Never earned a bloodier bit of coin myself”

“Say it to the rest of the Inn you idiot.” Taurus scolded, but a wry grin was showing more and more. He let out a short laugh like he couldn’t help himself and poured everyone a cup and raised his. “To the fruits of our labor.”

They all toasted, and took a deep drink from their glasses. Harlan again noticed the blood dried under his nails, and tried his best to dig it out.

“Some sweet fruit we’ve harvested, brothers.” Milo belted.

It didn’t taste quite as sweet as it should to Harlan. Even expensive, honeyed mead couldn’t get the taste of blood off his tongue. *Don’t ruin their good time with your sour mood.* He had already told himself he wouldn’t let his own doubts bring down his friend’s highs. But he would remind them the job was not done yet until the jewels he held in his surcoat were sold.

“It’s not harvested until we’ve reached Holdenport. Remember that before you go counting your coins.” Harlan said.

“Save your thinking for the morrow, Harlan. Just enjoy the night, we will deal with the consequences another day.” Taurus chimed in, patting Harlan on the back.

He decided Taurus was right, he would enjoy tonight, and save his troubles for the morning. There was no point in fretting with what was out of his control, especially when he felt like he had already lost his control once today. They got nice and drunk, even singing to a few of the songs. After what felt like an hour, Harlan recalled they had ordered food, and his stomach remembered quickly as well. When he went back to the bar, it seemed the hooded figures had swapped positions, the giggly one had fallen asleep face first against the bar, and the other was fondling the bar maid, sloppily drunk, and the smell of wine radiated off him in sour waves. *Even pug face looks a bit drunk now. Or is that just exhaustion?* Harlan was too drunk himself to care. And too rich to even really want to rob them right now, easy a target as they seemed.

“Hey, I paid good coin for my food. Do you plan on serving it tonight? Or are you too busy entertaining this drunk?” Harlan asked a bit too loudly

The hooded man barely raised his eyes for half a second. “Give the man another flagon of mead on me. And serve the poor man his food.” He said, before directing his attention right back to the women.

“Apologies, Ser. I'll be right over with it.”

“I'm no Ser. Just bring our food.”

*Insult a man and get a free flagon? Our luck must be turning.* He turned to go back to their table and saw Kurt sitting in the booth with them, still dressed in chainmail, and his dark grey surcoat, with the orange flame of the city guard creeping up the back of it, as if the coat itself had caught fire. *The bastard actually came. Dressed in his damn uniform too, the fool.*

“You made it? Tell me, what did the City Watch think of our showing today?” Taurus was asking Kurt while Harlan slid back into the booth. Milo was too focused on the fresh batch of booze to care about Kurt now sitting next to him.

Kurt downed half of his own glass in one go. He looked over both shoulders as if he was afraid someone was coming in after him.

“There was blood pooling on the cobblestones still when I left.” He said, hands shaking slightly. “They-they were looting the place. People were fighting over them in the dark. Someone had gotten into the other strongboxes somehow, there were gems scattered across the street. The guards showed up and then more people came to watch and-and then someone threw something and-” He stopped. He finished the rest of his cup and poured another. “I left when the chaos got out of hand - ah, that's a poor choice of words. But I figured it was my best chance to get out.”

Harlan sobered up quickly. “Hold on, poor choice of words? What are you saying?”

Kurt fumbled around with his words for a second

Harlan locked his pale grey eyes onto him. “Kurt, tell me what you mean.”

“We-well, I was back out in the city tonight. It was my shift in the street. I didn’t know you guys had still planned to do the job. I thought you told me you were calling it off, Harlan?”

“Plans changed.” He huffed, still digging under his nails. “Now tell me what happened.” Harlan said. He wasn’t the biggest of the group, but he commanded respect like no other.

“Well after your butchery, the folks around saw the body guards dead, along with one of the damned merchants. Not to mention the lack of City Guard in the street. I must say you clouts made gory work of this job. But they smelled blood in the water, and saw the gems ripe for the taking. Too many folks started to show up, next thing I know it’s a bloody brawl. More guards showed up and my lot aren’t known for restraint.” Kurt took another deep drink from his cup, spilling mead into his dark brown beard. He wiped his mouth, sopping it up with the sleeve of his surcoat.

“When the smallfolk seen the Guards barreling down on em, it turned from brawls to killings. They were killing for the jewels, or carving their way out, didn’t make much difference to my eyes. Once us Guards got some more bodies around we were able to cut off any exits. Next thing I knew our captain was cutting off hands, whether they had the jewels on them or not. He figured if they ain’t cleared out by now they either stole em and lost em, or they were waiting for easier pickings. Some folk lost both hands. I couldn’t bear the sight. Soon as we dispersed the crowd I hopped right over to the stables, and well, here I sit now. ”

*Sol save me. What a mess we made.*

Silencer sat amongst the group for a minute. Taurus was the first to break the tension. “More food for Erd, not on our hands, friends.”

Milo nodded solemnly in agreement and looked like he was going to chime in, but the innkeep came over with their food.

“I think I’ll order myself a trencher.” Kurt said

Harlan stared at his own, more grease and gristle than anything in the brown river on stale bread. "No, have mine, I have lost my appetite." He said as he pushed it over to Kurt

All that was on his mind now was blood. The blood pooling on the cobblestone street. All the blood they washed off in the stream. The blood stained clothes packed away in their saddlebags. And most of all, the dried blood still under his fingernails.

Kurt didn't hesitate as the rest of the crew began eating as well. Harlan was starting to feel disgusted with more than just the food, but with his company as well. *How many children will go hungry because their father is dead now, or without his damned hands? Just for a bit of gold in our purse for once.*

"How did you three end up killing those blokes anyways? Looked like some real nasty business." Kurt asked through a mouthful of food.

"You'd better ask Harlan about that. He killed damn near all three of them." Milo got out, licking his stew covered fingers.

"Two and a half." Taurus said with a cold smirk. "The last one needed some convincing from my sword."

"I told the fool not to make a move. I had my blade on him proper, and still, I saw him try and make a move for his dirk, stupid man. I opened his throat from one ear to the other." Harlan said, still picking at his nails. He paused his face in his hands and rubbed the pressure from his temples "That would have been all, if the other one didn't break away from you, Milo. I had to put an axe in the back of his skull to save your life."

Milo put his hands up innocently. "Wasn't my fault." He chuckled.

"A well paid sellsword don't know when to quit, do they. But how did the merchant die? Poor sap was swimming in a pool of guts when I seen him." Kurt asked

Before Harlan could answer he was distracted by the whisper of steel on leather. He shot his head around and instantly pulled his own sword halfway from its sheathe, ready to fully draw at the drop of a pin.

"Speak another word about my wife and I'll have your tongue peasant." The hooded man said. His sword's hilt was shining brilliantly, even in the low candle light. Vermilion, sunset pink, deep maroons, and the twinkle of black diamonds. Harlan had never seen a sword so beautiful, its

blade a deep and dark silvery steel. Not as dark as blackened steel, and reflective as a mirror. Its edge sharp enough to shave with.

“In fact, I will skip the tongue and take your head whole. A wise man would choose his next words carefully.” He said, surprisingly clearly for a man so drunk he seemed to barely be able to stand without wobbling.

The innkeep stood frozen in fear, sword pointed at his neck. The pug-faced man put a hand on the hooded man’s shoulder, and whispered something in his ear. The whole inn had gone silent, all watching. The sleeping companion had woken up now, his chuckling the lone noise echoing through the Inn, save for the ragged breathing of the innkeep. The laughing man’s hood had slipped down now, revealing a mane of shaggy brown hair. He wasn’t anyone Harlan recognized. The gang watched the situation tensely, along with the rest of the patrons. They had all seen their fair share of killing today, but if it came to swords they were all ready. The hooded man slowly lowered his sword, and slipped it back into his sheathe. He drunkenly plopped back down into the stool and poured himself another cup. The inn slowly started to liven back up, and the chatter began again.

“We can continue this conversation in the morning. It’s best if we retire to our rooms for the night. Taurus you’ll share with me. Kurt, you’re one of us now, you’ll be with Milo.”

“We don’t have enough coin for our own rooms?” Milo complained.

“It was all they had. Now shut up and go.”

The room Harlan chose was musty, and cold. The bed was itchy, and the floor was covered in dust and filth. It was still better compared to the one Milo and Kurt would be sharing tonight. *All this effort and we’re still sleeping in the slums.* But that’s not what truly rattled in Harlan’s mind as he curled up on the cleanest part of the floor. He let Taurus take the itchy bed. *A sword like that is not owned by just some lord’s son.* He couldn’t help thinking that he should have taken a closer look at that pair of hooded men. He also couldn’t help thinking that someone might have overheard their own conversation. Most men in this inn would not think twice about dispatching the gang to get their hands on this loot. *Hopefully they will chase after the tosspot prince instead.* He tossed and turned into an anxious sleep with his hands held firmly over the inside pocket of his surcoat, which held the heavy bag full of stolen gems.

#### **Chapter 4. Elric**

The servants had scrubbed him until his skin was pink and raw, and doused him in sickly sweet perfumes. They had brushed and matted his usual unruly mop of sandy brown hair into

something presentable. Seth had laid out his clothes for him as well, a red velvet doublet with the Forten sigil threaded onto the breast, black velvet breeches, and a crimson light cloak lined with ermine, with the bursting sun embroidered onto the back of it.

Seth, his personal attendant, had walked back into his chambers with a scolding look on his long face. “Young prince, you must get out of bed.” He shot. “Your brother will be coming shortly to bring you to Sol’s Sept. I’d suggest you are at least dressed by then, he is not one to be late to his own coronation”

“I don’t want to be a prince today.” Elric complained.

Seth answered only with a frown. Elric knew he’d have no words to comfort him. He simply crossed the room and picked up the doublet. Elric moaned and groaned but gave in to the silent pressure, and got up.

“Arms out, My Lord”

Elric stuck his arms out as Seth helped him into the doublet. Elric started doing the buttons while Seth was straightening the collar. *Do they have to make them so uncomfortably stiff?* He thought as he was helped into the rest of his garb. *I may look like a prince today, but I do not feel as one.* The breeches were tight in all the wrong places, the doublet felt thick and warm, the polished leather boots felt tight enough to blister, and Seth pricked him while fastening his cloak with a silver sun brooch. He would much rather be donning his beat up gambeson and leathers, thick with the smell of sweat and sawdust. Lately, the hard days in the yard with Ser Griffin had become more and more frequent, and enjoyable. And all that was expected of him was to improve each and every day. *I can’t even live up to that. I haven’t even been to the yard in two days now.* He had not even left his chambers in those two days. It might have been two moons if he had the choice. But it simply could not be, Aemen had said he must be ‘present and princely’ for all of today’s festivities. *Whatever ‘princely’ might mean.* To Elric it seemed to simply be dressed in lady clothes, and smelling like he rolled in a bed of flowers and honey.

“Finally looking more fit for your station, My Lord.” Seth smiled and gave his collar another straightening.

“I would rather wear armor, like a knight would”

Seth shook his head in disapproval, making his long stringy hair sway on his shoulders. “And I would rather spend my days in my own castle, on my own lands, enjoying a fine vintage this morning. But alas, I am no lord, as you are no knight.”

“I could renounce my royal duties, and make myself a knight.”

Seth’s long face shriveled as if he had smelled something sour. “As are your rights, My Lord. Though you may find-”

“Even a knight has his duties. This is yours.” Aemen interrupted, strolling into the room. He was dressed head to toe in cloth of gold, every inch shining in the light. Even his hair looked golden, braided tight and perfect down his back. “I know these past few days have been hard, Elric. If you believe I am not as hurt as you, you are mistaken. But we have a duty, to our people and our family”

“You don’t need my help. Look at you, you’re perfect.”

Aemen looked at him warmly, his bright green eyes meeting Elric's dark grey ones. “I need you, brother. I was going to save this for perhaps a more grandiose moment. Though it seems you need to hear this, dear brother. You will be named my heir today, at tonight's feast. Until I have a son of my own, that is.”

“Your heir? Why not Corren? Or Marken?”

“Elric, I told you. Corren was rejected by the lords, the people, even father. He neglected his duties, and refused to make friends with his lords. Marken, he ... he can barely manage himself, let alone a kingdom, you know that. Our people chose me. Our brothers are willing to send our people to war, to die over this. It is my duty to defend our people. They rely on the king's peace to be upheld, and neither of them could be relied upon. They are not men of honor, but men of greed and ignorance. Corren disappeared for four whole years while father was sick. All for a trade war he should not have been involved with in the first place. Marken has wasted his own life away in pursuit of, well ... makers know what. I alone was left to rule in father’s constant absence, to keep the realm steady, to help see you raised right. I hope you see the truth of it, Elric. You will not be seeing them again. I’m sorry, I wish it were not true.”

*First father, now two brothers gone.*

Elric fought back against tears. “They didn’t even say goodbye.” He managed.

Aemen walked over slowly and calmly, and pulled him into a warm embrace. Elric hugged him back firmly, holding the tears at bay. *At least I have Aemen. He will always be on my side.* Aemen let go and mussed up his brushed hair.

“It suits you better. If mother could see you now she would be proud, Elric. Now I'm sorry, we must go or we will be late for the ceremonies.”

Elric felt a bit better now, straightened himself up, and followed Aemen through the stone corridors. The castle was busier than ever today. Servants were bustling around like bees in a hive. The great hall was stuffed to the brim, lords, knights, pages, and squires alike. They quickly walked past before Elric could spot anyone. When they reached the stables, Elric was in awe. Thirty of the City Guard were all readying their horses, all in their flowing black cloaks, with their chainmail and dark grey surcoats with the threaded flame creeping up their backs. The Kingsguard were all in attendance as well. Elric knew three of them by sight. Ser Reed Wynn, Ser Owen Sheppard, and Ser Hugh Hairiton “The Storm in a Saddle”. Beside them were two he had not met yet, but Aemen did tell him that Ser Edmund and Ser Robert had left with Corren. *I'll miss that grizzly old knight.* One was lean and black of hair, with sharp handsome features. The other made Elric stop in his tracks at the sight of him. He seemed to be a giant. His face looked like a child's though, his hair a curly knot of dark brown, and he had just a bit of brown fuzz growing on his chin. But he was thick with muscle, and easily the tallest man in the room. *Wow, he's even bigger than Corren. Sol save the poor souls that must fight with him.* Elric always loved the Kingsguard armor, and had envisioned himself in it countless times, though he knew he never truly could wear it. Steel plate with black inlay, each design slightly unique to each Kingsguard, and the bright red cloak that followed them. He had always dreamed of himself in that armor, protecting one his brothers. Aemen, as if reading his mind, led him right to them without hesitation.

“Elric, allow me to introduce our new members of the Kingsguard. Ser Cade Caldwell.” Aemen said while motioning to the smaller one. He nodded politely, but his sharp features showed no emotion. “He is my new sworn sword, you will get used to seeing him by my side. And this is Liam Alexander.” The giant man gave a sheepish grin and a clumsy small bow. “You remember Lord Walton right? This is his youngest son. He is not far in age from you, Elric, just seventeen. I hope you two will make fast friends, I have named him your new sworn sword as well.”

*I have a sworn sword? My own bodyguard? I guess that makes sense, I am the heir now.*

“Seventeen? You are just three years older than myself, Ser.”

“I look forward to seeing you in the yard, My Lord Prince. I still have much of my own training to complete.” Liam said in a voice deeper than any Elric had ever heard.

“Training? I thought kingsguard were meant to only be the best knights.”

Liam frowned and opened his mouth to respond, but Aemen answered before Liam could get a word out. In a hushed voice he leaned over so just the two could hear. "It will be announced today that I am to marry his Lady Sister Elara. To marry a maid so fair, her father named his price. Liam here is solid, but he has the potential to be a wonderful knight. You two will train together, and make each other truly great. He will be your good brother soon Elric. Play nice. Now let's go saddle up."

*Play nice? He is the size of a horse, he will destroy me in training.* He decided he'd worry about that when it came time, and started to look for a stablehand to help him saddle his horse. *Where's Godry?* Elric looked around for the lanky stablehand, who almost never left the horses side, especially on a day like today. but even after searching all of the stables he couldn't spot him. He thought about climbing into the loft but he simply didn't have the time. *Odd, Godry wouldn't miss this.* He found his saddle and walked over to his horse. He was a chestnut palfrey named Copper, for his coat that looked like a copper coin in the sunlight. When all was ready he mounted up and waited for the moment. When all the City Guards and Kingsguard were mounted up and ready they were led out by Ser Reed, followed by Aemen, on a huge white destrier and Elric behind him. The remainder of the Kingsguard circled them, Liam making his own massive horse look small. The City Guard made another line around them and formed the rear as well. In front of them all was a man carrying a giant banner with the Forten sigil, the silver spear and shield, on a bursting sun background. As they made the short ride to the Great Sept of Sol, the crowd grew ever thicker. As each second passed and more eyes were on their party, the cheers started rolling in, and the chatter grew to roar. Elric had never seen this many people gathered outside the keep before. A few of the City Guard were sent ahead to clear a larger path for them, struggling to yell over the crowd. As they made their way closer to the marble steps outside the keep, Elric realized there were smallfolk flooding every street as far as he could see, all here to bear witness for his brother's crowning. *He deserves this, he was the only one who stayed for his duty. The only one who stayed for me.*

As they made their way into Sol's Sept, Elric was shocked at how many people they had stuffed into it. Every lord and lady close enough to attend in time seemed to be pressed into the ancient stone building, their finest clothes making the interior shimmer with color. Lord Lucian Foster, their fathers Hand of the King, was waiting there as well, and swiftly came to speak with Aemen. *Aemen must have made him his Hand, father would be happy.* He looked at all of the other lords in attendance and did his best to recall them all, as he had been taught. Lord Walton Alexander, of Hartwell, with their golden bull on a green field. Lord Foster's and his daughters, all bearing the purple grapevine on a white field. The Hairitons, a rearing white and silver horse, on a dark blue background. The Redwoods, clearly a tall reddish tree, on a green field. Even a few smaller lords, like House Caldwell, a crossed silver fish on a field of light blue, as well as House Aldridge of Sigil Stone, a grey mountain peak, in front of a black field. That was all the lords Elric could point out by name, but he knew there were some smaller ones as well. He settled in

for what he knew would be a long day. The High Septon's voice carried through the vaulted ceilings for what felt like hours, words washing over Elric in waves he couldn't quite hold onto. Something about The Makers blessing. Something about the realm's peace. Something about the sacred duty of kings. Elric's feet had begun to ache in his new boots before the first prayer was finished. He kept tugging at his collar, and its grip continued to tighten around his neck. Aemen on the other hand, looked as cool and calm as water, ever tranquil. He stood now in his coronation robes. Cloth of gold to the floor, worked through with the Forten sigil in black. Small. Repeating. Hundreds of them. Thousands maybe. The sigil covering him from collar to hem like armor made of dynasty. The gold now seeming secondary to the sigil it carried. When he was finally crowned the lords, ladies, knights, and smallfolk all cheered loudly. The crown had five stems, made in the style of the Forten bursting sun. All topped with a different colored diamond. Yellow for Sol, blue for Elo, white for Omen, green for Erd, and a red one for House Forten themselves. Aemen wore it gracefully, and the crowd responded to his every move. *The people truly love him. He was born for this.* Elric did not feel born to be where he currently was, though. He was dreadfully uncomfortable, and his legs had started to fall asleep under him. Thankfully Aemen kept his speech short yet still sharp. As soon as it was over the Sept was quickly cleared. The crowd of small folk had dispersed a bit on their way back, making the ride quick and easy, at least for the royal party. The stables were busy again when they returned, hands moving quickly between horses. Elric used the chaos to look for Godry one more time. Still, he could not find him, he even climbed the old wooden ladder to the loft.

He walked up to Aemen, while he was passing his own horse off now. "Aemen, where's Godry?" He asked.

"Who?"

"The tall groom. You know him. He basically taught me to ride a horse. He's been here forever."

"I have no clue, Elric. But now that you point it out, it is odd he's not here. He must have left with one of our brothers. How disappointing."

*Why would he leave with all of his stuff in his loft?* But before he could ask Aemen anything else. he was swept away by the heap of hungry lords all heading into the keep. The great hall was crammed with all the lords and their men. But Elric had his own seat of honor on the dais, next to his brother. The feast was magnificent, with countless courses one after the next, pottage and pies, cuts of venison, pheasant, lamb, and a whole roast boar, a dozen different fish all prepared with their own unique sauce, onion and carrots roasted in a buttery glaze, mashed neeps and potatoes swimming in gravy, wines and ales flowing as if they were water. Sweets followed as well, delicious marzipan shaped into delicate birds, fruits in a thick syrup, fresh honeycombs, hot

spiced wines. They even had a sugar sculpture of the Candlelight Keep, which all the guests seemed to love. Elric himself admitted he had never seen a better depiction of his home.

Elric was enjoying just his first bite of the boar when Lord Walton approached him and Aemen. He was a tall man, but not nearly as tall as his son was. Elric knew he was a few years older than sixty and had a scruffy, grey beard to prove it. Though he still had a full head of thick black hair, and a spring in his step.

Aemen saw him coming and rose to embrace him.

A few whispers passed between them but Elric heard none of it. Lord Alexander turned to Elric, with a tight grin.

“My Lord Prince, wonderful to see you again. Makers bless your father, it was too soon. Though the realm was fortunate to have him as long as we did.”

“Thank you, My Lord.” Elric didn’t know what else to say. There was an awkward silence like this man expected more from him.

“Well, you look to be growing into a strong young lad. You will make a fine knight one day. If Liam takes it too hard on you, just let me know, I will set his head on straight.” He said with a smirk

“You plan on staying?” Elric asked

“The new Master of War can not command from outside the war council dear boy.” He clapped Elric's shoulder and moved along.

It seemed every few minutes another lord or his son had come and introduced themselves to Elric. He had seen almost all of these men before, but spoken to just a rare few. Before today, these men had all hounded Aemen and Corren, some even Marken. They had never given him more than just a passing glance before. Now with all these eyes on him, he was reminded how stiff his clothes felt on him and he wanted nothing else than to wave away the rest of these men coming to flatter him, and apologize for his father. *Thanks for the reminder during this wonderful feast.* He wanted to tell them. But he knew Aemen would be upset if he neglected his courtesy. Once everyone had eaten their fill, and more, Aemen rose and put a hand in their, swiftly silencing the room. He let the quiet hang in the air for a moment, letting it speak before he began.

“Thank you all for a wonderful day of celebration, and I would like to build on today’s success. But before we celebrate what is to come, I ask that we honor what has passed. My father, King Deamen, second of his name, kept the king’s peace for forty years. He deserves our gratitude and

our prayers.” A murmur of agreement moved through the hall. Aemen waited for it to settle. “In his memory and in the spirit of that peace, I name my brother, Elric Forten, as my heir apparent. First in line to the throne of Dawn until the time comes I have a son of my own. He is everything I could hope for in a brother, as well as an heir, and everything this family should be.”

The hall responded loudly. The chatter swinging back to life with a boom. Lords raised their cups, some genuine, some performative. Elric feeling every eye in the room find him simultaneously. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, feeling the weight of the room on his chest.

Aemen raised his hand yet again, commanding the room as if they were his troops, and his word was his sword. “To add to our celebration tonight, I have the honor to tell you, I have recently been betrothed to the beautiful Elara Alexander. We shall be married just three weeks from today, in a grand event. We will also host a special tournament, in honor of our new Queen. The winner will receive a thousand Gold Suns, and the honor of being named the Queens Champion. I hope I will see all of you there.”

*A thousand Gold Suns. That is a purse worth fighting for.* Elric had always dreamed of fighting in a tournament. But now he was heir, he knew better than to even consider asking to take part. He took a scan around the room, trying to remember each face he might see at the wedding and tournament. It was his duty to know these Lords, after all. While looking around he noticed he did not see Amelia Trenton nearby. She was his mothers niece, who had been staying in the castle for the past year, sent to try and court Corren's son Dearon. But Dearon had left a few weeks passed now with his mother. They had never gotten close anyways, though her and Elric had quickly become friends though, often studying the realms history together when he was not training. *I suppose she left as well, at least I'll have new friends to make.* He glanced over at Liam Alexander, his new sworn sword. He looked silly at his own seat at the dais, too big for his chair and he had clearly had too much wine, his face flushed red. He wasn't sure if he was looking forward to being with this new person constantly. But he knew he was now looking forward to their first training session, he would have to try his hardest just to avoid getting squashed like a bug at heel. *Maybe I should try and talk to him now.* He caught Liam's eye across the dais and opened his mouth to say something. But the room had other ideas. Someone struck up the opening notes of When Sol Bent His Knee and within seconds the chorus swallowed everything. Even Liam, cup raised, face flushed red, bellowing every word of the chorus.

*When Sol bent his knee to the man from the fog,  
The stars held their breath, the world went dark  
A new king rose from the depth of the stone  
And light returned only to follow him home  
Raise up your cups, to the blood of Dawn*

*The spear and the shield and the sun carry on  
From the Hand to the Sea let the Forten name ring  
Sol bent his knee, now he'll bow to our king*

Elric decided he would have plenty of time to meet his new bodyguard another day. Lucian Foster lay asleep in his chair, his malady being far too much food, and a whole flagon of wine. The page had seen this enough times to know not to bother him. Elric tried his best not to laugh when his snoring became like rolling thunder. *If Amelia were here we might laugh loud enough to wake him.* What might actually be loud enough was the bickering between Lord Aubrey Redwood and Lucile Foster, the heir of Vernona. The two had warred over The Saltan Islands for centuries, a dispute so old neither house could remember who struck first. The same scraps of land changed hands so many times the maps had stopped keeping up. “The same rocks traded in blood for three hundred years.” Scholar Crestin had told him once. It seems they found something to eventually agree on, as they were both chuckling now. Elric searched the room for Aemen and found him at the end of the high table, Lord Walton Alexander on one side and Lord Henry Hairiton on the other. He had a cup in his hand and a smile that suggested he had been waiting all evening for just this conversation. He was laughing heartily at something the Hairiton lord said, his hand on the man’s shoulder, while simultaneously leaning just slightly toward Walton Alexander as if sharing something meant only for him. Both men looked like they believed they had his full attention. *Has he ever had an awkward moment in his life?* Aemen caught Elric's eye and excused himself, and strolled over to where Elric was sitting. He leaned over with a wide smile across his face. “Keep your lords fat, drunk, and feeling important, Elric, and they will do all they can to keep you in power.” Aemen whispered with a wink, and continued to the next table.

Elric found himself yawning and his eyes feeling heavier after a cup of hot wine that Aemen let him have. He decided he'd had enough before he ended up face down in his food like Lord Foster. He made his way back to his own chambers, a peaceful sanctuary compared to the chaos of the day. He finally stripped out of the tight stiff garb he was wearing into some soft comfortable wools. He sat on the edge of his bed in the quiet and let the day settle over him. It had been the one of the longest days of his life, and somewhere in the middle of it he had forgotten to be sad. That realization sat uncomfortably in his chest now. His father had been dead for two days and he had spent most of this one craning his neck at knights and sneaking extra helpings of marzipan. *Father would have understood. At least I hope.* He laid back and stared at the stone ceiling. Tomorrow the keep would still be full of strangers. Tomorrow he would still be the heir to a kingdom he hadn't asked for. His brothers would still be miles away, and only going further. His father would still be dead.

But the marzipan had been very good tonight.

## Chapter 5. Marken

The morning light was a warm bath upon their backs as they struck out from Dunham, heading west with the tangle of rivers and streams that ran along The Marsh Road. They had been riding for almost an hour now, the sun slowly rising behind them. Marken was enjoying the sound of the brooks steadily babbling beside the road, and the romantic swaying of the white poplar trees in the wind. His peace was broken when he noticed Ser Cortland started turning his head around, confusion writ upon his face, his curly brown hair falling out of his cloak's hood.

“Wait a moment, why are we headed west?” Cortland asked, still looking around as if he still wasn't sure where they were. “We should be riding the Low Road to Hardwick.”

“Have you been sleeping in your saddle for the past hour?” Marken chuckled “Brimsby took it upon himself to get us passage by ship. Captain of the guard that he is. He sent two men ahead last night. They will get everything prepared for us in Stonebrook.”

Arthur Brimsby flushed red, “Excuse my insolence in this matter, but I would prefer to avoid any further events similar to yesterday. Not to mention, we will reach Ohrello much faster this way, and avoid any... unsavory men we might chance to encounter as well.”

“I don't think they get any more unsavory than Cort and I, Ser.” Marken grinned. That got a hearty laugh from Cortland. “Calm yourself Arthur, I was just poking fun. Though I can't say last night was as awful as you want to make it out to be.”

Arthur shook his head, but kept his mouth shut, his greying hair swaying on his black cloak, his silver hair matching the threading. Cortland did no such thing though. “You threatened to take a man's head.” He said through a fit of laughter. “Pray, what did he even say of your wife?” He asked.

Truthfully, Marken could not remember what he said, or if he had really said anything at all. “Ah, it matters naught. There are many things I regret doing in my life, none having happened yesterday.” *Sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry.* “So, Ser Arthur, what have you missed most of home these past few years?”

He seemed somewhat taken aback by the question, and took a minute to thoughtfully form his answer. “I have no children of my own, My Lord. But I have several nephews from my sister. I will be pleased to see them again. To see how much they have grown, to test their mettle in the yard. The eldest should be able to at least make me break a sweat now.” He said, beaming.

“How touching, and the rest of you men?” Marken asked.

There were five other Roscena knights with them at the moment, all of whom had left home as well those years ago. Ser Tommas was the first to answer. “I got me a nice wench, big tits on her, she was my first. If she isn’t with child, I’d like to take her as my wife when we make it back.” Ser Brannock answered next. “Dont got me no women, but my mum. Can’t wait for a hot, home cooked meal. She makes the best fish soup in all of Dawn I say.”

“What will you miss of your home, My Lord?” Arthur asked after the men had finished. *Why it seems I'll miss out on all the fun.*

“There is nothing left for me in that city, Ser. I may never hope to see it again. Why dwell on matters past. I look forward to seeing my wife again. Though I'm not sure she will return the favor.”

Arthur gave a curt nod, understanding this topic was one he best not dwell on.

Marken resumed his peace, as the men went chattering on. Brimsby *had* shortened their trip considerably, though Marken knew that was not the cause. Marken had revealed himself quite clearly in the Inn, and if it wasn’t Aemen's men on their tail, a few wide eyed smallfolk would take their chances for a prince's sword and purse. When the day began to end, and the sun started creeping beyond the horizon, they reached a cross in the road. The sky was blushing, a panting of pinks and orange and only a few wisps of white clouds sat still in the sky.

“Let’s head north here a bit,” Cortland suggested. “We will make it to Aims by midnight. We can get a few rooms, and be back on this road by mid morning tomorrow.”

Marken chewed on this for a moment. A hot meal, a bed, and a whore to warm it, sounded awfully pleasant.

“No.” He decided. “There is higher ground further down the road. We will camp there for the night.”

Ser Arthur had an approving smirk on his face, while Cortland wrinkled his nose. Marken cared for neither man’s reaction. He wasn’t doing it for them. They found a nice hill that sat far enough away from the road, and set up camp. Ser Olyvar had caught a couple of rabbits, who were now crackling over the cook fire. They had some hard bread and hard cheese to eat with it, as well as a few skins of wine being passed around. *It has been ages since I’ve had a night under the stars.* One by one the men found their bedrolls. Brimsby lingered, as well as Ser Hadley, a hard faced brute who never spoke much.

“Ser Hadley and I will take the first watch, My Lord.” Brimsby said.

“Not needed.” Marken replied, a small smile forced on his lips. “Me and Cort will be up for a few more hours I’m sure. Have your rest, I will wake you when we take ours.”

Arthur opened his mouth to protest but must have changed his mind, as he and Ser Hadley walked away. Marken broke out his personal skin of wine, when they found the current one running dry. He took a long drink, savoring it, and passed it to Cortland. The night had settled in, and the pair were content listening to the crackle of the fire, sharing the wine, nibbling on some cheese left over from supper.

“Can I ask you something, Marken?” Cortland asked from across the fire. He had been honing his sword for most of the night, and now he sat oiling it.

It had been a long time since someone had referred to his as just his name. *Normally it’s ‘Lord’ this or ‘Prince’ that.* He found it refreshing.

“Of course.” He replied.

Cortland put his sword back in its scabbard and set it aside. “Do you truly believe Aemen will let you live?”

Marken’s black eyes met Cortland’s light blue ones. Marken had explained the situation to his men when they first left Dawnseye. He had not spilled all the details, but enough that they understood the state of his affairs. Marken looked now at his hedge knight, resolve etched into his face. Marken recalled what he knew of Cortland’s life before they met. He was an orphan from the mountains of Sigil Stone, raised by a local priest. A knight had passed through his town when he was still a boy and took him for a squire, and traveled across most of the kingdom with him. Marken knew no more than that, despite keeping his company for the better part of the last year. It was not until now that Marken considered that he may be the closest thing Cortland’s had to a friend, as he was for Marken. He let out a short, pained laugh, and snatched the skin back, taking another long drink. “I do not plan to find that out.” Marken said, with a dark twinkle in his eyes.

It was then that Marken decided to tell Cortland of his last stop in Dawnseye. Of his trip to his favorite small brothel on the outskirts of the city, with a very private room. And of the man he paid to slit his brother’s throat. For a long moment all that responded was the crackling fire and the quiet snoring of the other men. Cortland called for the wineskin back with a small wave of

his hand. He took a deep, long drink. They had been enjoying a sour Verona red from Marken's personal stores.

"How much did you pay him?" Cortland asked.

"How much do I pay you?"

"10 Suns a year."

"Hmm. Thirty years your pay."

"Makers have mercy." Cortland huffed. "Still, not enough to kill a king. Just enough to send the poor fool to his death."