

## **Act I: A Fate Uncertain**

### **Chapter III: We Write History**

#### **Jenna**

It had been five days. Five days since Ser Ilhan had been murdered. Five days in which she had barely left her chamber, outside of her duties. Five days in which she had been barely more than a meek shadow, trying to stay alive. She remembered the gaze in Harris' eyes, every time she met him by accident. He was a changed man. No gentle smile. No friendly voice. She hated him. She was afraid of him. And still, for some odd reason, Jenna Harking recognized a lot of herself in his gaze. Harris Flowers was afraid. He looked like he had lost his mind in fear and sorrow. And he actively avoided her wherever he could, she knew it. On the positive side, she noticed that her opinion on Lady Halla had changed too. The Lady herself hadn't changed at all. She shouted. She cursed. She hit Jenna for every mistake. If anything, she seemed to be even more brutal than before. But Jenna wasn't afraid of her anymore. She had seen a real monster now and understood what Ser Ilhan had told her. Halla was nothing more than a shadow compared to Harris. She was weak, weaker than Jenna ever was. But she overplayed this weakness with cruelty. On the first day, Lady Halla left her alone. But the second day was one of the hardest days Jenna ever had in Raylansfair. Her hands had still been shaky, her voice still been nothing more than a hushed whisper. She had been inattentive. Had dropped a tablet full of wooden bowels, filled with soup for the soldiers meal. Halla had hit her with a broomstick, so hard that she still felt it right now. But as the Lady screamed at her and cursed her, called her a worthless bitch over and over, Jenna looked at her with a look so full of hatred, that Halla was silent. And for a moment, Jenna had seen true fear in the housekeepers eyes. Ever since, she hadn't been afraid of her. Judging from some of the looks she received from Halla in return, it was more the other way around. Yes, Lady Halla was afraid of her. Or at the very least envious. When she first had this thought, it seemed to be ridiculous, even more ridiculous than Halla being afraid of her. But then, Jenna thought about it. Lady Halla was an old woman, well into her fifties. And on the third day, as Jenna watched herself in the small mirror her father gave her when she entered House Raylan's service, she noticed that her hair looked quite nice. Of course, it was still her hair, her ordinary and common brown hair. Nothing special. It wasn't close to Carmas golden blonde locks, or Harris impressive reddish-brown hair. But it still looked quite pretty. It felt strange that Ser Ilhans death gave her some sort of confidence. Yes, she still was afraid, but her fears just became bigger, overshadowing all the old and childish smaller fears. She wasn't afraid of Lady Halla anymore. She wasn't afraid of loud screams anymore, or of tall horses. More than ever was she afraid of true monsters, like Harris. And more than ever was she afraid of the things that were even worse. Death, for example. But, even though she was more afraid than ever, in a certain way she was also braver than ever. She was brave enough to look at Lady Halla like she had never done before. She was brave enough to admit some of the compliments she got from people, complimenting her work. She remembered that one of the guards once said that she had pretty eyes. Her father had always told her that she was a natural beauty. Of course, he had exaggerated when he told it. Nobody had ever called Jenna truly beautiful, not with people like Carma around. Then again, she had never talked that much to other people. Only her father... She closed her eyes and felt a lump in her throat. Her father... Jenna hadn't left the castle for five days, but she had asked one of the guards to look for him. It was normal that she did not see him every day. He had lots of work to do at

the farm, she mostly slept in her small chamber at the castle. Still, it had been a week since she heard from him the last time. And right now, she needed him more than ever. She hadn't seen her brothers for over a year now. Her mother had been gone for several years now... The past months it had been only her and her father. She wanted to tell him what happened. He would understand, he would know what to do. Normally he would visit her at least twice a week. Every evening, after he had visited his friends in the inn. But he wasn't here and she hadn't heard anything from him for days. It was almost as if something had happened to him... Jenna gulped and forced herself not to cry. That would be... She had to sit down on her bed to calm down. It would be even worse than when her mother died. It would be... She was unable to stop the tears from flowing down her face. Her father was missing. Her mother was dead. Her brothers were fighting a war. Master Eaton was dead. Ser Ilhan was dead. She had nobody to talk to, at least nobody she could trust in this matter. But she had to tell someone, she couldn't keep it a secret. But only her father came to mind. Nobody else would believe her, she couldn't trust anybody else. She was alone...

She didn't notice that the door was opened, not until she noticed that someone had entered the room. She looked up and saw Carma, her sweet and gentle smile, a worried look on her beautiful face. "Jenna?" Her voice showed her worry and as she sat down next to her, Jenna couldn't resist to hug her. Carma gently patted her on the back. "Shh, easy now Jenna. Everything is alright. Do you want to talk?", she asked. Jenna looked up into her warm blue eyes and sobbed. Something in Carmas behaviour made Jenna trust her. Yes, she wanted to tell her everything. But she couldn't. Not when she thought about Carmas family. She had three children, the youngest was just born a few weeks ago. No, Jenna couldn't stomach the thought of endangering her. She could never forgive herself. Carma mustn't know the truth, or else Harris would target her too!

"It's nothing... just... my father. I can't stop thinking about him", she answered. That was at least half the truth. Carma gave her a cheerful smile. "Everything is fine, Jenna. I am sure he has a lot of work to do. He will visit you soon, I know he will", she whispered. "Your father loves you. Everyone can see it. He wouldn't miss the opportunity to visit you, if he hadn't that much work to do. Urid saw him a few days ago and told me that he was alright. He was worried about something, so he might has no time to visit you"

Jenna shook her head. "Then why didn't he send me a message or something? After what happened to Ser Ilhan, I just want to see if he is okay", she gulped and felt a new wave of tears. Carma seemed to feel it too, since she hugged her tighter. "My father has never been there for me", she started to say. "Well... he has been there. But not like I wanted to. My mother died giving birth to me. Father... he blamed me for that. He hurt me. Badly. Every day of my life until he died. Drank himself to death. I hated him... still, after his death I was devastated. I mean, he was still my father, the only family I ever had. I didn't knew what to do, where to go. I was lost", she said. Jenna looked up, directly into Carmas kind eyes and for a short moment she saw sadness in them. "Why are you telling me that?", she asked. That did not help her! She didn't want to hear stories about dead parents!

Carma patted her on the back. "I was lost until I met Urid. Ever since, I have never been lost again. I have never been afraid again. What I want to tell you is, no matter how bad it comes, there will always be something that makes us keep going on. And someday it will be better. Everything becomes easier. And sometimes, you can find something good in the strangest places. I want you to not be afraid anymore. It gets easier. My father hated me and he

wasted his life without even thinking about me. Your father loves you too much to just waste his life. Don't be afraid. He will come back to you"

Jenna gave her a weak smile. Carma was always able to make her feel better. In a certain way, Carma was her best friend, one of the few people she would even count as a friend. But she couldn't talk about her father right now, she couldn't bare to think about the alternative of him being busy. She had to change the subject. "Why are you here, Carma", she asked. Carma let go of her and stood up. "Lady Halla tasked me with finding you. She said I should bring you to the great hall. Lord Harris and Septon Corbin want to speak to you" Septon Corbin! He was probably the only person in Raylansfair with any kind of authority left after Ser Ilhans death. She hadn't talked to him in the past days, she had been to afraid to even think about it. The Septon wasn't a brave man. Her father did not like him. Called him self-righteous and hypocritical. Still, should she manage to convince Septon Corbin that she speaks the truth, she could do something against Harris. It would be what her father would have done in her stead. It was the right thing to do. "Thank you", she mumbled and gave Carma a hug. "I guess I better find out what they want from me"

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Jenna would have been able to find the way to the great hall in complete darkness. She lived here for years now, walking this way every day. But never before had it seem so long for her. Every step was almost physically painful. Her legs were shaking, her body trembling. What if this was all a ruse, a trap by Harris to find out if she would stay true to her word? What if... what if Harris already planned her death? She was a danger to him, she could feel it every time she saw him. She knew the truth. And she was braver than Lady Halla, as strange as it sounded.

When she entered the great hall, she didn't feel brave at all. She felt timid, daunted, intimidated. There were only three people in the hall, all of them sat on the Honor Table. Harris sat on top, on the chair that usually was reserved for the Lord Raylan. He looked a lot better than he did a few days ago, but the wounds he received during his fight were still visible. Ser Ilhan had smashed his nose so badly that it would never fully heal again, he gave him a nasty black eye and smashed out several teeth. Still, in his fine green and golden clothes and his neatly combed hair, he almost looked like a real lord, not like the lowborn bastard, the murderer he was. To his left sat Lady Halla, who looked like she hadn't slept much in the past nights. Her usual hateful stare was replaced by a surprising insecurity as Jenna looked at her. And then there was Septon Corbin. He was a fat man, with a pudgy face and puffy eyes, clothed in a robe far more elaborate than a Septon should wear. He was a zealous man when it suited him, but ever since Jenna had seen him eyeing the blacksmiths daughter she had lost all respect for him. Still, right now he was the only man who could probably be her ally.

Harris looked up as she entered the room. "Jenna, glad you're here", he said, his voice sounding clear and strong, stronger than he sounded five days ago, when he had just killed one of the best men Jenna had ever met.

Jenna took a deep breath, followed by an ungainly bow. If only her legs weren't so shaky! "Lord Harris, Septon Corbin, Lady Halla, how may I serve you?", she asked. She had seen it. The knight, Ser Lucas, he had done it the same way. He had been polite and friendly during the conversation and everything had been alright. Harris gave her an approving nod, the look people usually reserved for dogs or little children who learned something new. Septon Corbin looked at her with his always dolorous face. "Jenna... Harking, right? You have been

there when Ser Ilhan died. I want to hear from all of you, what happened during this night?", he said with his mewling voice, commanding her with a handwave to take the empty chair to Harris right.

Jenna looked at Harris. He seemed to be calm, calmer than a murderer should be. He had some sort of plan, she just knew it. He needed to have some sort of plan. His face darkened as he answered. "You know what happened, Corbin. Ser Ilhan started a fight. I was forced to kill him"

Septon Corbin shook his head. "Nobody is questioning that, mylord. Still, the recount you gave me has been less than satisfying. I want to know everything. That's why I called your witnesses to be with us today.

"Ser Ilhan attacked me. He tried to seize control of House Raylan. He forced me to defend myself", Harris said with a sorrowful tone in his voice. Was he truly sorrowful? Or did he just lied to the Septon? Jenna couldn't tell, she had never been good at reading people. She had seen Harris as he lied on the ground, seconds after he had killed Ser Ilhan. He had looked so sad, so regretful. Still, he had looked like a monster for her in that moment and she had not pity for him. She had to find a sword for him.

Septon Corbin still did not seem to be convinced. He frowned and looked at Halla, who gave him a nod. "We all knew he was an ambitious man. I have been there, Corbin. I have seen it and I can confirm it", she assured him. That was unsurprising for Jenna. She didn't knew what Harris told Halla. She didn't knew if Halla told the lie willingly, or if the acting lord forced her.

The Septon gulped. "It is true that he has been ambitious... But this? He was a good and loyal man. Why would he do this?", he asked and looked at Jenna. She almost winced as she felt Harris hand on her shoulder. "Jenna has seen it too. She can confirm it, just like Lady Halla", the lord said. His voice was calm, friendly, his words directed at the Septon. Still, Jenna knew that he did not spoke to Corbin. Septon Corbin looked at Jenna. "Is that so? Then why is she shaking, Harris?", he asked, his voice getting a sharp tone. Harris hand on her shoulder slightly shivered and she looked at him. There was no doubt what he was going to do to her if she told the Septon the truth now. "I'm sad, Septon Corbin", Jenna whispered. "I liked Ser Ilhan. He wasn't a bad man. He wanted to help me" Another half-truth. Jenna was a bad liar, she knew it. But half-truths weren't that bad, right? She could do this. She only needed to get Harris approval here. Staying safe. There was no way she could tell Septon Corbin the truth, not with Harris in attendance.

The acting lord looked at her, visibly pleased. "The poor girl is shaken, Corbin, can't you see this? Surely you can refrain from interrogating her, can you? Halla saw everything, she can suffice. She can write and is certainly willing to even write it down for you, so we can send an account to King Gardener", he said. Septon Corbin shook his round head. "No, Harris. In the name of the Father, who gives us justice, in the name of the Crone, whose light shall shine on the truth, I am inclined to find out every side of this story. I have to speak to Jenna... alone", he said, but he had the decency to look at her. "Are you ready for this, Jenna? If you walk with the Seven, there is nothing you have to fear", he said. Jenna took a deep breath and looked at Harris, who gave her a friendly smile. "If you insist, I can't deny you talking to Jenna", he said and patted her on the back. "Tell him what you have seen this day, Jenna. Remember how I told you that the truth must be known? The Seven teach us that a lie is a sin, so I am sure you will do the right thing", he added with a look at Septon Corbin. His voice was friendly, kind and benign. Still, she had never felt so threatened by him ever

before. After he said this, Harris stood up, quickly followed by Lady Halla. "We are leaving you alone. When you're done with the interrogation, talk to me again, dear Septon", Harris said, before the two left the room.

After the doors to the great hall were closed again, Septon Corbin took a friendly look at Jenna. "So, Jenna. At first, I want you to relax. This is not an interrogation. You have done nothing wrong. But you need to tell me what really happened that day", he said, surprisingly kind. Septon Corbin was usually a man without any compassion for the smallfolk. Obedient to the lord in every way. Never speaking bad of a knight. And Jenna had believed him, had believed him that knights were always good, that lords were always benign. Harris was both, a knight and a lord. And he was neither, good or benign. But, what caused Septon Corbin to change his mind?

"The Seven love those who speak the truth. May the Father give you the strength you need. May the crone shine her light on you and show us the truth. There is nothing to be afraid of. I only want to know what happened there. I know that Lord Harris and Ser Ilhan got into a fight. I know Harris killed Ser Ilhan, rather gruesomely. But, what I want to know is, how did they get into this?", he said. Jenna looked at him. He seemed to be friendly, interested, almost fatherly. She wanted to answer, but gulped as another, truly terrible thought crossed her mind. What if this was a trick? What if Harris wanted to test her loyalty? What if Septon Corbin worked for him? What if he just wanted to hear that she was able to keep up with the story? But maybe she just got paranoid. Maybe this was her chance to tell someone the truth. Septon Corbin held no worldly power, but he was in some way more influential than Harris could ever hope to be. He was the Septon. He had contact to the High Septon in Oldtown. A word from the High Septon would have been enough to bring kings to their knees. A single letter from Septon Corbin would be enough to bring Harris to the gallows. If only she could trust him.

If only she could try to be brave.

**[Tell Septon Corbin the truth]**

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## **Maya**

"Are we there yet?"

Maya clenched her teeth and looked at her involuntary companion. Irving Todd was a short man, around Mayas height, but more than twice her weight, with shoulder length brown hair and light blue eyes. His small moustache could have looked handsome on a dashing Braavosi sellsword, but on him it looked quite ridiculous. And he was wearing his plain grey armour, as always. A direct order from the Bronze Lord and an order Irving gladly followed. Considering the conversations she had with Irving, Maya was certain that this armour had saved him more than once in his life. While she certainly was not a violent woman, during the past five days she had fought the urge to throw him overboard every second of the day. "Maya, have you heard me? I asked you a question. Are we there yet?", he asked again. His voice was high-pitched and squawking and probably his worst physical trait. Maya suppressed the urge to cover her ears, but couldn't refrain to let out an annoyed sigh. It has been five days since they have left Gulltown. Ever since, Irving started to get on her nerves. And not only on hers. Gregar kept mostly to himself, spending his days alone on the deck, feeding his owl with mice, later with fish. Yet, right now, even he had a visibly annoyed look on his face. Maya gave Irving a sharp glare. "Not. Yet. Irving", she hissed. Irving looked at

her as if she had insulted his mother. "Yeah, you could have said that nicer...", he moaned. Maya shivered and turned around to Gregar, who shook his head. "If you don't kill him, sooner or later I will", he mumbled, while gently petting his owl. "But you can tell him we're almost there", he added. Maya looked at the shore that could be seen in the distance. The past five days had been okay, apart from the fact that she had to spend them with Irving. They sailed on board of a small ship across the Bay of Crabs, the strait that separated the Vale of Arryn and the peninsula of Crackclaw Point. In the early morning, it was Irving who saw the coast first, even before the lookout saw it. Ever since he wouldn't shut up about it. Crackclaw Point. Maya remembered what she had been told about the peninsula. The First Men had driven the Children of the Forest to extinction there and settled down for several thousand of years. Crackclaw Point was a rugged and densely forested area, with countless valleys in it. Every valley had its own lord. All of them distrusted outsiders and none of them trusted each other. Territory conflicts or even full-blown war between two houses were common. And even the most powerful lord of Crackclaw Point was still poorer than a rich commoner from Gulltown. They were proud people, who never bowed to the Andals, until they had been convinced through marriage to join the Andal kingdoms. Until then, they had repelled the Darklyn kings of Duskendale, the Mooton kings of Maidenpool and even the Celtigars of Claw Isle, who descended from the blood of Valyria. The lords held nominal allegiance either to the Storm King or to the King of the Isles and Rivers, but held feasts with lords from the other kingdom, while fighting fierce wars against lords who should be on their side. They were wayward, stubborn and usually not very welcoming people. And Maya was about to land on their territory, unannounced and largely unprepared. In the distance, she saw the Dyre Den, seat of House Brune, one of the more important houses of Crackclaw Point and nominally sworn to Harren Hoare. The castle was smaller than some houses in Gulltown, with three crooked towers and scrawny looking banners on each of them, depicting some sort of fish eating a small red man.

Irving stepped next to her. "I'd say Lord Brune is already expecting our arrival. I see five men on the shore, wearing chainmail, a sixth in more heavy armour, likely the leader. Looks like his whole guard stepped up to greet us", he said. Maya looked at him, quite surprised. She barely saw anyone on the shore. That was probably the only useful skill Irving really possessed. He had phenomenal eyesight, far better than anything Maya had ever seen. Even Gregar seemed to be slightly impressed. "Now if your cooking could be equally good, you wouldn't be such a fucking annoyance anymore", he grumbled, which gave him a sharp glare from Irving. "Do you have a problem with my cooking, Gregar?"

Gregar sighed and shook his head. "Not even Ember eats muck like this", he explained, to which Irving gave an annoying laugh. "Of course not, since your damn bird only likes mice and the worst part of fish. Oh and its own shit. I forgot the shit", he moaned, before throwing his hands in the air. "But fine, if none of you appreciates my cooking, why don't we let Ember cook? I'm sure she can cook delicious raw mice"

Gregar gave Maya a sharp look. "Can I please throw him overboard? We are close to the shore, he will most likely manage to survive", he growled. Maya let out a short laugh. As annoying the situation was, seeing Gregar even more annoyed than her was delightful. "You expect Irving Todd to swim a few hundred metres? Gregar, that is just cruel", she smiled. To her surprise, Gregar even smiled back. "Well, I've heard slavers from Essos occasionally land on these cliffs. If we're lucky we can strike a deal with them", he chuckled. Maya took a

look at Irving, who was just picking his nose and shook her head. "We would have to pay them to convince them taking Irving", she answered.

Gregar looked at the shore. "I would be willing to pay more than I earn the whole year if that means we get rid of Irving", he grumbled, before suddenly sounding very serious. "You have to be careful around here. Lord Trymon Brune is an old and embittered man. His own sons shun him and prefer to run after pretty girls in Maidenpool instead of staying with him. He had to sell his daughter into marriage with the old Lord Crabb. He is an embittered man with little love for the Vale and even less love for his own kingdom. He only cares for himself. The fact that he has people awaiting our arrival does not seem right to me. Stay alert!"

The tone in his voice worried Maya as she looked up at the Dyre Den. She was an ambassador or Runestone. Would Lord Brune really dare to hinder her on her journey? A petty lord like him against the wrath of the Bronze Lord? Nobody could be that stupid...

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They arrived at the shore with a small rowboat, after they had paid the captain extra for it. Of course, Gregar was the only one to actually row. He insisted that Maya did not do it. She already wore the black cloak she got from Lord Royce, the cloak that showed her identity as the ambassador of Runestone. Rowing was beneath her now. After much whining and moaning, Irving agreed to row, but almost managed to sink the boat. After that Gregar was happy to do it alone. And he was a quite skilled rower, bringing them safely to the shore in only half an hour. The shore of the Dyre Den was a rocky, but densely forested area. To their left was a huge cliff, the castle on top. To their right were a few rundown houses, about half a dozen people on the streets between them, pale-faced and sad looking men and women, emaciated children and gnarled elders And five men, armed with chainmail and longswords, like Irving said. Their leader was the only one who looked like he had any kind of fighting experience. He wore black, plated armour and a short red cloak. His hair was short at the sides, but slightly longer on top, combined with a short and well-kempt beard. The stern look in his grey eyes hardened considerably as he looked at Maya.

As he approached, Maya saw something moving in the forest in front of her. Ember started to shriek and flew into the air, as a large black wolf stepped up. No... not a wolf. Wolves are not supposed to be that tall. Maya had seen proies who were smaller. That was clearly a direwolf! The beast sat down after a sharp glare from the man made it stop, but it still let out a deep growl

The man took an elegant bow in front of her. "Mylady", he said, while carefully looking at Gregar and Irving. "My name is Ser Aldrik Wolver. I am in service of House Brune and have been tasked with finding out your identities" His voice was soft, but determined. Maya looked at Gregar who seemed very calm. Irving on the other hand was trembling and shaking, while he pointed at the direwolf. "What... Seven Hells, what is this beast?", he stuttered. Ser Aldrik gave him a sharp glare. "This is no beast, this is a direwolf. My loyal companion, Knightfang. I can assure you, he does not bite, unless I allow it", he explained. Knightfang? Well, luckily there were no knights among her small group.

Irvings face got pale and for a short moment he looked like he was about to faint. Maya shook her head in disbelief. What a coward! She took a short bow in front of the knight before she answered. "My name is Maya Iresons, Ambassador of Runestone and the Kingdom of Mountain and Vale. These are my companions, Gregar Balvind and Irving Todd. We are on our way to the Reach, to negotiate for Lord Orson Royce of Runestone. We wish to replenish our supplies at the Dyre Den before going our way", she answered. Ser Aldrik

gave his men a short look. Maya gulped and looked over at Gregar. Her companion had a hand on the small hatchet at his belt. She herself was armed with her two daggers, but had carefully concealed them before leaving the ship. She disliked the way Ser Aldrik looked at his men.

“Ambassador of Runestone...”, he said slowly. His direwolf growled. “In that case I have to insist on taking you to Lord Brune. He would like a word with you”, Aldrik said. Gregar shook his head. “No fucking way. We are not here to talk to Lord Brune. You can't force us”, he hissed. One of the men started to laugh but was quickly silenced by a sharp glare from Ser Aldrik. “Take a look at my men and rethink your statement, Ser. As a matter of fact, I can force you. I would prefer not to. Lord Brune gave me strict orders to bring any person of interest to him. Come with me peacefully and nothing will happen. Lord Brune only wishes to talk. Of course, you have to give up your weapons first”, he said and looked at Maya. She met his gaze with her own furious glare. “Like Gregar said. No. Fucking. Way”, she answered. She had no time to deal with a petty lord whose ego was so much more bigger than his name! She acted on behalf of Runestone and the Vale. Besides, Lord Brune was a Riverlord, if only by name. She would never trust someone who was under the command of Harren the Black! Ser Aldrik sighed and made a short nod with his head. His direwolf responded with a sudden jump and let out a deep howl, slowly approaching the group. Irving went down on his knees, screaming in terror, fumbling at his sheet, before finally managing to throw his sword away. “Take it!”, he screamed. “Take it! Keep it! I don't even want it! Just have mercy!” Two soldiers approached Gregar, who took out his hatchet, looking determined to start a fight. Maya could understand him. She would like nothing better than to fight her way to freedom. But Irving was no real help and Gregar couldn't take on them alone. She herself had several years of training and she was certain that she could defeat any of these men. They were no soldiers, likely nothing more than local farm boys who got a sword and rudimentary training. Ser Aldrik on the other hand...

“Please, Ambassador Iresons. There is no need for violence”, the knight said softly. His sword was still in his sheath, his hands raised, almost as if he was negotiating. But this wasn't a negotiation. This was a capture. “You're about to take us hostage, Ser Aldrik”, Maya answered with a sharp glare. It took a long time to make her angry, but now the point was reached. Ser Aldrik shook his head. “I am simply following orders. Lord Brune hired me to bring persons of interest to him, not to kill them”, he explained. Gregar spat on the ground, his face full of disdain. “Hired? So we're getting captured by a fucking mercenary and delivered to a petty lord who hasn't even enough men to do it himself?”, he growled. “And you're telling me this petty lord is stupid enough to provoke Orson Royce?”

Ser Aldrik shook his head. “Like I said. I follow orders. I am not provoking anyone and I don't know about the lords intention. But the orders have been very strict. I shall bring persons of interest to him, unarmed, so he can have a talk with them. And I would say the Ambassador of Runestone is a person of interest”, he explained again, this time slightly less calm. When he looked at Maya, his glare was hard as iron. “Ambassador Iresons, one of your men has given up. Your second companion is very stubborn. You don't carry any weapons and he stands alone against six men and Knightfang. This is suicide, Ambassador. Order him to stand down, or face the consequences”, he said with emphasis. Maya looked at Gregar. Her companion seemed to be intent on fighting his way out of this. But this was suicide. She couldn't let him sacrifice himself. “Gregar...”, she said softly. “Surrender. This is an order”



Gregar looked at her, his gaze a mixture of relief and anger. "Fuck this. If anything happens to us, the Bronze Lord will have your heads", he grumbled, but threw his hatchet on the ground regardless. Ser Aldrik gave her an approving nod. "I am relieved this didn't end in violence. Now, Ambassador Iresons, I won't allow anyone armed near Lord Brune. Do you have any weapons with you?", he asked. He didn't know about her daggers! He really didn't know!

"Aren't you going to search me either way, Ser Aldrik?", she asked. The mercenary seemed to be genuinely surprised by this, if not offended. "Searching you? I am a man of honour and you are a lady of the Vale. I won't touch you in any unfitting way, Ambassador. I have to take your word. But know that I have a hard time believing that a woman like you travels unarmed. And know that I won't refrain from killing you, should you attack Lord Brune", he said. Maya closed her eyes. She had two daggers with her. Two daggers that could be handy when negotiations with Lord Brune went out of hand... On the other hand, she believed Ser Aldrik when he said that he would kill her. He was no man who would lie like that...

**[Give up one dagger]**

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## **Marak**

*Don't look into the fire Marak...*

*Don't look into the fire...*

Marak looked directly into the fire, the fire of the small candle, looking for any signs of visions, seeing nothing. Ah, damn it! During the past week, he had caught himself doing this, over and over. There were days where he looked into the flame until his eyes started to hurt, until dark shadows started to dance in the corner of his eyes. There were days where he thought that he could see something. Figures, dancing in the flames, like animals fighting each other. Then he realized that he saw nothing. It was stupid! And not what he should do! Right now, he should fuck some girl in the Stormlands or split some skulls. Or do both on a particularly good day.

But it wasn't a good day. He was sitting here in a shady inn somewhere near Highgarden, together with Noelle, the craziest girl he had ever met. And he was drinking the worst ale he had ever drank! It was a sweet, disgusting reddish ale, served in glasses instead of wooden mugs. It had no head, it was warmer than ale should be and it was all in all disgusting. He couldn't even get drunk from it like he should be. Noelle drank only water, like always. She refrained from drinking beer or anything like that. They had rarely talked after the incident in the house. She had a nasty cough for several days and for a short while Marak was slightly worried that he had permanently damaged her throat, somehow. He simply had no knowledge in choking someone non-lethally. But the priestess did not hold it against him. He had to tell her what he had seen in the vision, again and again. After a while, the cough faded, her voice returned to her usual melodic tone. And then she had told him something too. Told him how blessed he was, that he was a chosen of rollmop. That the Lord of Light didn't talk to anyone. That he was something special. Yeah, that last part had always been clear to him. But still, he didn't want to be special in that way. Noelle had told him about Raylansfair. Apparently there was something in the archive she desired. Something powerful. Right... as if Noelle without something powerful in her hands didn't terrify him enough from time to time...

Marak snapped out of his thoughts just in time to grab the barmaids arm. "More ale, wench", he grumbled. "And this time bring me your good stuff. Not this piss!", he added. The barmaid looked at his glass and smirked. "I believe it is wine, m'lord", she explained. Marak looked at her in disbelief for a moment. Was that dim-witted wench trying to mock him? "Less talking. More serving", he growled, before he let the girl go. Noelle looked up. "You seem to be in a bad mood today", she remarked. Seriously? Did she saw that in her flames? For days now, Marak had felt this urge to kill something, or at the very least to break something. The urge had always been there, sometimes he had given in to it, sometimes he had suppressed it. But the vision in the flames had brought out the worst in him. He felt like killing something every minute. Right now he looked at Noelle. And not for the first time during the past week, he asked himself if it was worth following her around, following her orders like an obedient little dog. "No shit, Noelle? How can you tell that?", he answered in an annoyed tone. Noelle gave him a warm smile. "No need to be sarcastic, Marak. It doesn't suit you", she answered and Marak wasn't sure if she just insulted him somehow. "I am just worried, that's all. You seem aggressive"

Marak slammed his fist down on the table. "Aggressive? Do I seem aggressive to you? After I almost broke your fucking neck?", he hissed. At first he had been intrigued by her. He still was, albeit now there were times where her almost casual tone of conversation pissed him off. How could she always remain so calm? It would help if she was pissed at him. He had a long history of women being pissed at him, from Karhold to Sunspear, from Yunkai to Pyke. But never before had a woman actually forgiven him for attempting to murder her. And right now he had no other words for what he almost did. Was he sorry? No... Not sorry. But he was angry. Not at himself and not entirely at Noelle but at everyone else. Oh, how he wanted to burn this whole place to the ground, with their snarky wenches and their piss-ale!

Noelles smile faded. "You did almost kill me, I won't lie. But the Lord decided that I was not meant to die that day. That you were not meant to kill me. I have trust in R'hllor. He is my fire in the darkness. I am not afraid as long as his flame burns inside of me", she explained. Marak shook his head. A fire burning inside of her? That would explain the strange warmth. Still, it must hurt like hell! There were days where Noelles crazy ramblings made no sense, not even to him. He just couldn't understand these religious types. The Drowned God was alright of course. Any god that explicitly commanded it's followers to pillage and plunder was a god Marak could follow. Other gods were less sympathetic. He once met a priest of the black Goat. And killed him after the dark gibberish the man delivered started to get on his nerves. He had met several Septons, self-righteous hypocrites, denying themselves every fine pleasure that made life worth living. He had killed several of them. And fucked a Septa. But never before had he met a Red Priestess. Noelle was hot, in more way than one, but something in her behaviour was cold, methodical, analytic in a way Marak did not like at all. And she never got angry. A few days ago, nea Horn Hill, two thugs had started to harass her. One of them had hit her in the face and left a small cut on her cheek. In her calmest voice she had ordered Marak to kill both of them. Marak obeyed. And Noelle had been composed as always. Marak wasn't scared of a woman, he wasn't even afraid of any man. But Noelle had something on her that sent shivers down his spine. Her cryptical way of speaking really got on his nerves and no doubt that was one of the reasons he was so angry in the last few days! He slammed his fist down the table again. "Screw your rollmop...", he growled. Noelles gaze hardened for a moment. "R'hllor...", she hissed. "I tolerate your behaviour. Your violent antics. Your excessive swearing. Your drinking. But I won't tolerate you mocking the

one true god” Her voice sounded hard as stone for a moment and Marak had to close his eyes to avoid her burning stare. Why did he feel the need to apologize? He never apologized!

“Do you understand?”, she asked, her voice gaining sharpness with every word. Marak gulped and had to give her a short nod. “Good”, she remarked, before looking at the guests. “Raylansfair is four, maybe three days away if we’re lucky. While you took a leak, I talked to a merchant who just came from there. Apparently the old lord is dead. Until the king names a successor, his castellan is the acting lord. However, the king is a busy man. It could take months until he decides in that matter. Months we don’t have. That’s why we should try our best to get on good terms with this castellan, do you understand?”, she explained. Marak gave her an annoyed nod. “I am not stupid Noelle. And I told you earlier, I don’t care about your plans”, he growled.

Noelle gave him a mild smile. “Oh, but you should. My plans affect us all, for they prepare the arrival of the Chosen One and will help him in bringing fire to all of Westeros”, she said and now Marak gave her a slightly curious look. There it was. This stuff about ‘bringing fire’. He wasn’t afraid of fire. In his years as a mercenary, he had set countless fires. But something told him that Noelle did not plan to just burn everything down. Her plans were far more terrifying than that. “What do you mean?”, he finally asked the question that has been burning in his mind since they first met.

Noelle’s gaze became a bit enraptured as she looked at the candle. “Fire and Blood, Marak. The Chosen One will come with fire and blood” Yeah, now that was informative... Before he could say something again Noelle continued to talk. “There will be death. Lots of death. I don’t know who is going to die, the Lords’ visions aren’t that detailed. But I see His Chosen One triumphing, if I help him. He will bring fire and blood to those who refuse to bend their knee to him. He will bring peace and justice to those who follow him. He will be loved. Revered. He will defeat the Great Other, the Lord’s only enemy. He will defeat winter, the night that never ends and the cold itself. The Lord watches our steps, Marak. His light shines down upon us. And with his blessing we can help his Chosen One to triumph against the forces of winter”, she explained.

Marak shook his head in confusion. He kinda liked the winter from time to time. And there was nothing as refreshing as taking a cold bath after a long day of fighting. In his eyes, there was nothing wrong with a bit of cold, if the alternative would mean being like Noelle.

“And how can this Raylansfair be of any help? I mean, I have never even heard of it before!”, Marak exclaimed. Noelle chuckled. “There are many things you haven’t heard of before. Personal hygiene, for example. Or sophisticated language. That does not mean these things aren’t powerful”, she explained. Now... Marak was almost certain that this has been an insult! He opened his mouth to protest, but Noelle cut him off again. “Raylansfair has an archive. A historical archive, to be precise. It is without a doubt the most complete historical archive outside of the Jade Library in Yi Ti. In Asshai I found an excerpt of this archive, stolen by a Valyrian thief, almost two thousand years ago. The things I’ve learned there has opened my eyes. And the things this excerpt was hinting at have been even more interesting. Apparently the archive has hidden chambers, tunnels who reach down deep into the earth, chambers who haven’t been opened in thousands of years. These dense oafs don’t even know how old their own archive is. The treasures they have inside...”, she said and shivered in rapture.

“Before you ask... yes I’m also talking about spells here. These insular idiots at the Citadel claim that magic has started to die out thousands of years ago. From what I know, they

might be right, this one time at least. They call Valyria the last ember, for the dragonlords have been once powerful in sorcery. But even before the doom came upon Valyria, the dragonlords sorcery got weaker. The magic of your Age of Heroes has indeed started to die out. But that does not mean it has no power anymore. You know that, don't you?", she explained.

Marak looked at her, quite confused. "You know, I don't understand even half of what you're saying, don't you?", he said, but that has been only half the truth. Like every man he heard stories about magic. How it was all but gone. How it was somehow still practised in distant regions, like Asshai or Qarth. And like any clever man, Marak didn't want to deal with magic. This was probably the thing that terrified him the most in Noelle. What she did... some of the things she did couldn't be explained, not even by a man of his intellect. The visions she had when looking into the fire. How she was always able to start a fire, even with damp wood. How she never felt cold, even when all she was ever wearing was that thin red dress.

"So, what are you suggesting? We just go there and break into the archive?", he asked. That was something that interested him more. He didn't need to know why she was doing all of this, he didn't even want to know it. But he wanted to know what he should do there. Noelle gave him a warm smile. "Of course not. We try to get into contact with this acting lord. The merchant told me that the old lords death has been more than mysterious. That his Maester committed suicide afterwards. The acting lord is rumoured to be a suspect. He will be surely grateful if we help him. With your muscles and the blessing of the Lord, this should pose no problem for us. We're not just breaking into the archive, they are going to invite us in", she explained, before standing up.

"We are here today for this man", she said and pointed at a man who sat by himself in a corner. He was obviously a knight, albeit he wasn't wearing full armour. His brown hair was at shoulder-length and he had a trimmed beard. From what Marak could tell, the man looked like a true warrior, worthy of respect. "Who is this?", he asked.

Noelle shrugged. "I don't know. I asked the lord for a vision of a man who could help us and he showed me this man. A knight obviously. Likely in service of House Raylan. It will be your job to befriend him", she explained. Marak chuckled. Befriending a knight? "Listen, Noelle, you hired me for one thing: Killing people. That's something I am good at. I don't make friends easily", he said and was careful not to speak too fast for her crazy brain.

Noelle's smile faded. "Well, you will befriend this one. If you haven't noticed, I am a woman. There is only one way I could befriend him and that's something I don't do anymore. He is a warrior. You are a warrior. And he is obviously a man on a mission. Find out what he wants. Help him. Win his trust, for he will be our key to the archive", she commanded. "In the meantime, I will go to my room and try to find out more about the plans our Lord has for us" With these words, Noelle stood up and started to go to the room she had rented for herself. Marak shrugged. Yeah, befriend someone. Nothing could be easier... For someone who had such a great knowledge about the world, Noelle was pretty fucking stupid sometimes. But she commanded. He obeyed. With a sigh, Marak stood up and started to walk towards the knights table. The man saw him coming and narrowed his eyes, so Marak forced himself to give him a friendly smile. Or something resembling a friendly smile. Fuck this, he wasn't drunken enough to be friendly!

"Ah... Good evening, Ser...", he started. "The name is Marak..." By the Drowned God, he was bad at this! The knight narrowed his eyes even further and Marak noticed a nasty scar over

his left eye. "Ser Darren Tallwood", the man growled. Yeah, that could have been better. He needed a strategy for this, quick!

**[Try to be charming]**

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### **Willfred**

Willfred backed against the wooden wall of the small farmhouse, holding his greatsword with both hands, breathing heavily in excitement, looking up to Lord Crakehall, who gave him a cheerful, gap-toothed smile, while carefully eyeing the backdoor he was leaning next to. Regardless of General Tallian's arguments, the old lord accompanied his scouts for this mission and had somehow managed to persuade Willfred to come with him. And even though he had already passed his seventieth name-day, once he grabbed his axe the old lord displayed an almost youthful excitement over the skirmish that would follow. Two days earlier, one of his scouts returned to the main army, reporting a destroyed village in the valley they were about to enter. It had been an ordinary village, located two days from Silverhill, seat of House Serrett. The scout had found tracks of at least half a dozen people who had entered a small forest and Crakehall insisted on tracking these men down. Tallain had been against it, had constantly reminded the lord of his duty to accompany them to the Rocks border. But Crakehall did not back down from his plan and Willfred was only too happy to oblige as the old lord asked him to accompany the scouts. For the past two days they had followed the tracks, on feet to avoid unnecessary attention until one of the scouts had found a small farmhouse, currently occupied by half a dozen heavily armed men. From the safety of a nearby forest, Willfred had caught a glimpse on one of the men, an unkempt, scarred man clad in chainmail, armed with a longsword. This was not an ordinary marauder using the absence of Lord Serrett, who fought at the Golden Tooth, to pillage at his leisure. He was too well-armed for that. One of the scouts suspected these men to be deserters, tired of the long war against the Ironborn. But Lord Crakehall had a different theory and Willfred was inclined to agree with him. For him, these men were no deserters. They were Ironborn.

Crakehall gave one of his scouts a sign. The man blurted out a small whistle, signalling for Crakehall's men at the other side of the farmhouse to fire their arrows. A surprised gurgle sounded, showing Willfred and Crakehall that the arrows had found a target. Inside the farmhouse, surprised shouts could be heard. Crakehall did not waste his time. The old lord raised his axe and opened the small backdoor with an almost casual smile, before jumping inside. Even before Willfred entered, he heard a loud battlecry, followed by surprised sounds of pain from the men inside the farmhouse. In his youth, Quentyn Crakehall had been a fearsome warrior, albeit he never won a big tournament. Instead, he preferred to fight in battles. According to rumours, Crakehall had never fought a fight without killing his opponent. With the years, his legendary bloodlust faded slightly, getting replaced by jovial cruelty. Still, he was a renowned warrior and even in his advanced age more than able to knock an opponent out with a single strike of his axe. Willfred was excited to fight with him. As he entered the farmhouse, it became clear that Crakehall didn't need the help. He had already killed one of his opponents and was currently fighting to clearly intimidated men at once. Two more could be seen in the small room, another one stepped out of a backroom. Three men who stood near the farmhouse's only window had been killed by arrows, a fourth had been shot in the shoulder and was wincing in pain. Without thinking about it, Willfred

attacked one of the marauders, an average looking man with short brown hair. He wasn't wearing armour and actually didn't look like he had expected Crakehall's ambush. But he was armed with a broadsword, a fine weapon, usually wielded by soldiers, not by common bandits. Willfred took a swing to his opponent's belly, while the man tried to step back. His opponent clearly underestimated the reach Willfred had with his sword and got hit in the stomach area. With a quick strike to the head, Willfred ended the man's life, just in time to raise his sword again, to parry another opponent's strike. His second opponent was around his height, with a severely broken nose and an unkempt beard. The man was wielding a longsword and screamed a loud battlecry as he attacked again. His attack was cut short by Lord Crakehall, who embedded his axe in the man's skull. "You owe me one!", he screamed as he pulled out a dagger. Willfred looked behind Crakehall and saw both of his opponents lying dead on the ground. The last of the marauders pointed his sword at Crakehall, but seemed to be impressed, if not intimidated, as the old lord started to charge at him. "Crakehall for the Rock!", the lord shouted, evading a blow to the head with a quick duck, before impaling his opponent with his dagger. Willfred looked around the farmhouse. In only a few moments, Quentyn Crakehall had killed five men, while he himself only got one of them! In Castamere, Crakehall clearly behaved like a man of his age, sitting hunched, being mostly silent. But for every mile they had been on the road, the lord appeared younger and younger, sitting straight, smiling like he was at least thirty years younger and wielding his axe with the strength of two men. But this... Willfred had to admit, he was impressed. A pained cough made him turn around. The last of his opponents, a man who got hit in the shoulder by an arrow was clutching his wound, looking up to Willfred. "I yield...", he mumbled. "Drowned God have mercy, I yield..." Willfred looked up as one of Crakehall's scouts entered the room. "We found two of them hiding in the forest. They ran too slow", the scout told him.

With a terrifying laugh, Quentyn Crakehall walked next to Willfred. "Good work, boy!", he said, giving him an approving pat on the back. Willfred shook his head. "You killed five men, mylord. I got only one", he answered, which led to another short laugh by Crakehall. "At the end of the day, it isn't important how many men you have killed. What's more important is, how much fun you had while doing it! You had fun, right boy?", he said. Willfred allowed himself a slight smile. In some way, he felt alive after this fight, almost inspired by the old lord. His father was a very careful man, who would never lead a charge like this personally. In his younger years, Willfred thought this cautiousness was cowardice, but as he grew up he understood the wisdom in his father's actions. Still, fighting alongside Crakehall proved to be oddly satisfying. It was all he had ever dreamt of as a child. "Most fun I've had in ages", he answered. Crakehall shook his head. "You need to fight more, boy. It'll prevent you from aging. Or it'll prevent you from getting old", he grinned, before turning his attention at the wounded man on the floor. "And we got one of them alive..."

Crakehall grabbed the wounded man at the neck, lifting him up until he looked him directly in the eye. "Now... let's see what we can get out of him before sending him back to his drowned god...", he hissed. The wounded man shivered and struggled as Crakehall almost started to choke him. "We can do this quick...", he hissed before giving the man a punch on the wounded shoulder "Or we can do this forever" The wounded man winced and shivered, very clearly deadly afraid of the old man who had him at his mercy. "Please... please m'lord, let me live...", he begged, while gasping for air. Crakehall gave his scout a short nod. "You go into the backroom. Tell me what you see there. Then I'll decide..." His voice was sullen,

growling and hard as iron. Willfred noticed that the wounded man started to breath heavily. "No... no please m'lord! I never wanted to do it! They forced me! I was afraid, please...", he started to beg but was interrupted when Crakehall grabbed his left hand.

"Four bodies, m'lord!", the scout shouted. "Two men, two women... as far as I can identify them. The men are in better condition than the woman. Fucking Ironborn hacked off their limbs, but left the skin intact. The women had it worse..."

Willfred didn't dare to look Crakehall directly in the eyes. Hearing his voice was bad enough. "Four bodies... the women had it worse...", the old lord repeated blankly. "The women had it worse..." With a sickening crunch he broke his captives hand, which prompted the man to cry in pain and terror. "You tell me one more time you never wanted to do it. Come one, I dare you...", Crakehall hissed before looking at Willfred. "Boy, you get outside. This little fuck will tell me everything, but I still won't let him go gently", he commanded. Willfred opened his mouth to protest, before catching the look in Crakehalls eye. Afterwards, he was more than happy to oblige.

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It took Vashord Tallian and the main host of Crakehalls army three hours until they arrived at the farmhouse. Three hours in which screams of agony turned into hushed cries for mercy. Crakehall didn't grant it. It wasn't until Willfred was already able to see Tallians less than thrilled facial expression that Quentyn Crakehall stepped out of the farmhouse. His hands, wrapped around the hilt of his axe, were sprinkled with blood and his frown seemed completely out of place for him. Yet, Willfred couldn't help but to feel that what the lord had done was justice. The women had it worse...

With a stony face, Tallian rode up to them. "I assume you are done with your... past-time activity, Lord Crakehall?", he asked, his voice oozing with disdain. Crakehall gave no answer. Instead he looked at Willfred. "He is dead, if you want to ask this", he explained, before finally looking at Tallian. With every second, he seemed to snap out of his sullen mood, finally showing the General a big grin. "You missed a lot of fun, Vashord! They didn't expect a damn thing. Young Willfred got one, while I took five down. It was glorious!", he explained. The general shook his head. "Does that mean it is over?", he asked. Crakehall shook his head. "The bastard I interrogated told me where the rest of his men are located. This is not over until they are all dead!", he explained. Tallian narrowed his eyes. "Is this really necessary, Lord Crakehall? How many are there either way?"

Lord Crakehall let out a loud and happy laugh. "They are a large group, they already destroyed two villages. They are almost a hundred men!", he shouted and raised his axe. "You might do all for your pride, Willfred, the Lannisters might roar all day, but there's none so fierce as a Crakehall! We will meet them in the field and we will crush them! And then we shall send their heads back to Harrenhal!" Willfred looked at General Tallian, who seemed to disapprove of this. But as he looked back at Crakehall, he couldn't contain a smile. This would be a glorious battle! "Lord Crakehall, allow me to fight at your side", he said. Crakehall patted him on the back. "Good boy! We will lead the vanguard. The first in battle, the last to leave!", he exclaimed.

Tallian gave him a furious glare. "Have you both lost your minds? We're talking about a hundred men here. We outman them two to one. There is no need to fight personally. You are the most powerful lord of the southern Rock and the eldest son of the most powerful lord of the northern Rock. The kingdom can't risk loosing you", he explained. Crakehall shook his head. "You are a craven, Vashord and pathetic. What good is a lord who is too sissy to lead

his men into battle? I will fight at the frontlines, like I always do”, he growled. Tallian shook his head. “Reckless idiot...”, he muttered, before looking at Willfred. “And you, Ser Willfred? Do you want to risk your life, or do you want to stay safe? I don't have to remind you that your safety is essential for our mission, do I?”

### **[Fight at the frontlines with Lord Crakehall]**

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#### **Lyria**

The dagger was a masterpiece. Lyria wasn't quick to praise herself, but she had to admit that she outdid herself. The seal on the daggers hilt looked exactly like the drawing she received from Wolfius almost a week earlier. She had a few problems with the finer details, but in the end she was more than happy with it. Wolfius would be pleased... Which lead her to think if she really wanted to please him. She hadn't seen the man during the past week, not even glimpses of him. But now that the day approached where he would enter her forge again, she started to get nervous. But... why exactly? Wolfius hadn't done anything wrong so far. He had a strange way of speaking. He had a piercing stare and an unnerving smile. The way he looked at Rosalie worried her. But he had done nothing wrong. She just wanted him gone.

A sudden screech made her look up. On the windowsill sat a black bird, a raven, letting out another screech as she looked at it. The window was open as always, to cool down the room a bit. Still, it was highly unusual that a bird actually flew into the forge. Lyria took a step closer, carefully watching the raven. The bird watched back, seemed to look deeply into her eyes. Lyria felt a slightly uncomfortable feeling as the raven looked her in the eyes. The bird stood completely still, making no noise, just sitting on the sill. It's stare was... almost menacing. Lyria gulped. “Fuck off...”, she mumbled, trying to shoo it away with a handwave. The bird did not move, not even as she almost hit it. Instead it continued looking at her for a few more moments, before finally flying out of the window again and into the evening sky. Lyria shivered and for the first time in ages, she closed the shutters.

As she walked into the forges main room, Wolfius dagger in her hand, she saw Rosalie sitting in a small chair, apparently taking a small nap. “What are you doing, young lady?”, Lyria asked with a stern face. Rosalie was supposed to greet customers in her forge, whenever Lyria was working and couldn't do it herself. They were not supposed to see a sleeping Rosalie the moment they entered the forge. Her daughter opened her eyes and jumped up. “Nothing, mother! I was paying attention, I swear”, she stuttered, before yawning. “Okay... I might have closed my eyes for a few moments, but who cares. It's not like we have that many customers in the evening either way. More like, we can be lucky to have a customer at daytime”, she shrugged. Lyria allowed herself a slight smile. “You know your job, Rosie...”, she mumbled before yawning herself. She had worked the whole day to complete Wolfius assignment. He would come soon, maybe tomorrow or the day after and she did not want him to return again because she hadn't finished her assignment yet.

“Are you done with that knife you had to forge for the creep?”, Rosalie asked. Lyria gave her a stern face. While her daughter was right, she wasn't supposed to talk like that about a customer. One day, she would inherit the forge and had to watch her manners. Lyria raised her hand, showing her daughter the seal. “A masterpiece. Wolfius will be pleased”, she explained. Rosalie looked at the hilt, examining the seal. “You were supposed to forge that?”, she asked. Lyria nodded. Rosalie raised an eyebrow. “For his... friend, right?”, she asked again. Again, Lyria gave her a nod, now slightly more confused. Rosalie seemed to know



something. Right now, her daughter grabbed the dagger, closely examining the seal on the hilt. "You do realize you just forged an Ironborn weapon, right?", she asked.

Lyria felt her heart beating in her chest, a sudden wave of shock, mixed with anger. "What... what are you saying? How do you know?", she stuttered. Rosalie shrugged. "House Hoare of Orkmont. The four symbols depict the ancient Ironborn empire, from Bear Island down the western coast to the Arbor", Rosalie explained. When Lyria gave her a questioning look, she sighed. "Philip showed me a book in the archive...", she mumbled, almost apologetically. Even though she had plenty of other things she wanted to ask, Lyria's motherly instinct proved to be stronger. "Philip? Philip Loren? What do you have to do with him?", she asked sternly. Philip Loren! That man was no company for her daughter! Rosalie looked at her for a moment before opening her mouth. "Oh... No! No, we have not... he was just nice and I wanted to see the archive. Nothing happened. He was polite and friendly. Do not worry...", she explained. Lyria shook her head. Do not worry! As if that was so easy...

A sudden noise in front of her forge cut her out of her thoughts. It sounded like someone approaching, before turning back again, almost as if someone wasn't sure if entering the forge would be right. Rosalie looked at her mother, apparently sensing a possibility to delay the coming lecture. "You should look who that was. Could be a customer...", she mumbled. Lyria gave her a stern look. "This is not over, young lady!", she grumbled. Unfortunately, her daughter was right. Maybe that was a customer. It wasn't that dark outside, so there was nothing to be afraid of. And even after nightfall, there was nothing to be afraid of. This was Raylansfair after all! But, just to feel safe, Lyria took the dagger with her, the dagger with the sigil of House Hoare on it... Seven Hell, why would Wolfius want a dagger with an Ironborn sigil on it? Does that mean his friend was a Hoare?

With an uneasy feeling, Lyria left her forge. It was darker than she thought, with dark shadows already gathering in the small alleyway her forge was located in. Still, there was no customer...

Lyria winced as she saw a shadow approaching. "Hello, blacksmith Mettel...", the figure said, before she recognized Wolfius. "I believe you have finished my assignment, yes?", he asked, his cold smile sending shivers down her spine. She managed to give him a slight nod. "Yes... here it is", she said, showing him the knife.

Wolfius took a long, fascinated look at the knife, fascinated by it. "Wonderful work, my dearest blacksmith Mettel. Now... I guess I owe you a reward...", he hissed while reaching inside of his overcoat. Lyria resisted the urge to run back into her forge and slamming the door behind her. She just stood there, frozen in terror. With a dangerous smile, Wolfius pulled a small purse out of his coat.

"Fifty golden hands, just as promised...", he hissed, before starting to laugh. It sounded like a wolf howling. "Don't look so surprised, blacksmith Mettel. What were you thinkin? That I would betray our agreement? That I would draw a knife? What an... absurd thought. I am a man of honor, blacksmith Mettel. I always stay true to my word. In return, I have to ask something from you too... Do not tell anyone about this. It is important. For me. For you. For pretty Rosie...", he hissed. Lyria froze in shock. Rosalie... no, he called her Rosie... She never called her Rosie when someone else was with her. How could he know? And... was that a threat?

She managed to give Wolfius a short and weak nod. The man's smile faded, replaced by a stern face. Somehow, this was less terrifying than his smile. "Good, blacksmith Mettel. I trust you. Stay true to your word and I might have more assignments in the future. I am more than

pleased with this dagger”, he said before taking a bow. “And now... good night. Sleep well, blacksmith Mettel”, he whispered before turning around and walking away. He left a thoroughly shocked and scared Lyria. She shouldn't tell anyone... Yet, something was wrong here. She could tell the city guard, just to make sure they would know about him. Wolfius could never find that out. But... how had he found out about Rosie?

**[Inform the city guard of Wolfius suspicious behaviour]**

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Torvin

It wasn't even noon and a dozen men had already died in Harrenhal today. The last of the great towers was almost finished, but in the early morning a block of stone that was supposed to be placed in the higher areas of the tower went flying several floors down and crushed seven thralls. Three more had been beheaded two hours later, for trying to run away. And as Torvin walked across the courtyard, a violent fight between two Ironborn ended with both dead. Gabin waited at the other end of the courtyard, next to the unassuming door that lead to Harrenhals dungeon. The young man seemed to be slightly nervous. His brown eyes looked carefully at Torvin as he walked closer and he only gave him a short nod as a greeting. Gabin took probably the biggest risk out of all of them. While Torvin and Garthon would have been simply executed as traitors should their plans become public, Gabin would have been violently tortured. George and Lord Tully were relatively safe, due to Tullys standing as one of the most influential riverlords. He could get away with it. But Gabin was no captain, which would prevent Hoare from using the most brutal tortures on him and neither had he a powerful lord watching over him. During the past week, Torvin had tried to find out more about his ally, why he wanted to see the king dead, why he ended up helping Lord Tully. But Gabin had blocked every attempt to talk about this matter. Instead, he spent his days mainly around Harlan Hoare, trying to influence him into meeting Torvin. Gabin had praised him highly, constantly emphasizing his lust for blood and cruelty. And finally, Harlan had shown interest in meeting him. Torvin couldn't exactly say that he was looking forward for it. The only thing that came as a relief was, that Harlan wasn't like his brothers. Torvin had never met them, but the stories he heard about them have been enough to give him an uncomfortable feeling.

“Are you ready to meet Harlan?”, Gabin asked as he stood next to him. “How can anyone be ever ready for that?”, Torvin answered with a slight smirk. Gabin did not smirk back, instead he just shook his head. “Don't ruin this, Torvin. We have this one try to impress Harlan”, he urged, before opening the door to the dungeon. “He went here a few hours ago. Spends some time with the prisoners. He's probably the only person who gets along with this torturer”

In silence, the two moved down the narrow staircase that lead down to Harrenhals dungeons. Like everything in this monstrosity of a castle, the dungeons were larger than anywhere else in Westeros. Theoretically, the dungeons were able to hold several thousand prisoners. Right now, only a few dozen were actually imprisoned here. The vast emptiness, filled only with muffled moans of desperate people, slowly descending into madness in the huge dark underground that was the dungeon, with their only company being the thoughts of what might linger in the dark, was probably the worst thing about these cells. Gabin had to light a torch so that they could see anything. The dimmed light illuminated raw stone walls, empty hallways, blank cells and a few dead bodies, starved to death or, in one particularly

gruesome case, apparently eaten alive by rats. Torvin and Gabin passed a prisoner who was chained to the wall, the skin on his back hanging down like a loose coat. The man raised his head and instead of eyes, he looked in Torvin's direction with empty, bloody holes. "Please, please, no more, I can't take anymore! I confess! I confess everything! Don't go away!", the man screamed and Torvin had to look away. The next cell held another prisoner, a young man with thin blond hair, who sat on the floor, his face distorted by madness. As he saw Torvin pass he raised his hands and Torvin noticed that several fingers were missing. "He was cutting... I told him everything... But he continued cutting...", the man whispered. Torvin continued looking over his shoulder even after merciful darkness overlaid the mutilated prisoner. "I hate this idea", he mumbled. Gabin gave him a stern nod. "I am afraid there is no other way. But Harlan isn't that bad, for a Hoare. What you've seen there was the work of the torturer. Harlan isn't creative enough for this", he explained. Torvin gulped. It told him a great deal about the Hoare family that 'Not creative' counted as a positive trait. In his opinion at least the King could be dangerously cunning, able to use the almost corporeal aura of dread that surrounded him in his favour. Luckily for the Riverlands, his sons weren't nearly as cunning. Harlan Hoare was an aspiring torturer, but far from being the worst of the bunch. This dubious honour would probably go to Harmund Hoare, the king's eldest son and heir, a serial rapist and occasional killer, who left a bloody trail in the Riverlands. Harren Hoare was a monster, but at least he knew how to maintain order. Any of his sons would be worse than he ever was. Should their plan have any chance of succeeding, they also needed to dispose of Harren's sons.

Gabin pointed at an open door. The room behind it seemed to be brightly illuminated. A thump, followed by a shrill, high-pitched scream and rough laughter rang out as Torvin and Gabin stepped closer. This time, even Gabin flinched. "Gods, I always hate it when they do stuff like this...", he mumbled. Torvin couldn't contain an angry look. Gabin hated it? Whoever was about to be tortured in this room probably hated it more! And Torvin... Torvin despised torture like this. He had nothing against taking defeated enemies as thralls and captured women as salt wives. He had nothing against whipping them from time to time, he had nothing against beating them to death if they defy his orders. But torture just for the love of bringing pain? That wasn't right. Even while being on a raid, even while committing acts that caused him nightmares from time to time, Torvin only followed the traditions of the Ironborn, the laws of the Drowned God. His strength gave him the right to take what he wanted. But there was no law that ordered him to be cruel, that ordered him to be sadistic. This separated him from these animals...

Gabin entered the room and even though Torvin couldn't see his face, he saw him slightly wincing. "Seven have mercy...", he whispered. A rough voice, the voice of a Hoare, started to laugh. "Your seven can go fuck themselves. This bitch asked for it!" A man stepped out of the room, patting Gabin on the shoulder. "I am glad you're here, my friend. And... your friend is?", he said. Gabin gave him a disgusted smile. "Captain Breaker. I told you about him, remember?", he explained.

"Torvin Breaker!", the man exclaimed with a slight smile. He was tall, not the tallest man Torvin had ever seen, but still impressive, with a broad chest and long black hair. The looks already gave him away, but the eyes told Torvin without a doubt that he was talking to a Hoare. They were deep dark pools without any compassion in them, hints of the unbelievable brutality inside. Yet still, Harlan Hoare was the second best of Harren's sons, not even close to be the biggest monster in his family. His smile wasn't as cruel as the king's,

his eyes slightly less bloodthirsty. Still, the bloody cleaver in his hands proved that he was in no way a good man. That wasn't animal blood...

"It is great to meet you!", Harlan said while patting him on the shoulder. "Gabin told me a great deal about you", he said while gently pushing Torvin inside the room, a small, stinking chamber, the floor smeared with blood. Torvin noticed two things. First, there was another man in the room. It was a fat man, a bit shorter than him, with a sparse beard on his neck but a clean-shaven face. This man was probably one of the ugliest people Torvin had ever seen. His wart-filled face with a noticeable harelip stood in stark contrast to genuinely handsome blue eyes.

The second thing he noticed was a dying, middle-aged woman, lying on a table in the centre of the room. Her left leg was missing, slightly below the hip and she was thankfully unconscious, slowly bleeding out, slowly dying. Noticing Torvin's shocked gaze, the hideous man started to chuckle. "Trust me, she asked for it...", he hissed, while taking a few steps closer. Torvin noticed he was limping heavily. "You are the Breaker, right? Interesting..." Torvin nodded. "Torvin Breaker. But I don't think I got your name...", he said. Harlan walked next to him and smiled. "You don't even need to know his name. He is the undisputed ruler in this wonderful dungeon. Holt Torv, Harrenhals master torturer and executioner. This man is the meanest bastard in the kingdom", he said as if he was giving a compliment. The torturer's smile faded and Harlan chuckled. "I've heard a great deal about you, Torvin Breaker. Gabin told me about that... thing you did at the Stepstones and I have to say, I am impressed. I said 'Gabin', I said 'I have to meet this crazy fucker'. Holt here wasn't sure if some of that stuff is even possible, at least until now. You might wanna recreate that...", he said with a disturbing enthusiasm while pointing at showing Torvin a multitude of different knives, pliers, hacksaws and a small hatchet. Torvin gave Gabin a disgusted and outright horrified look. True, he had killed a good number of people. He had no mercy, not even for women or children. But this... this was something else entirely. Harlan Hoare grabbed one of the knives with a downright repugnant smile on his face. The second best of Harren Hoares sons...

As he noticed Torvin's facial expression, Harlan slammed his fist onto the table. "I am bullshitting you, Breaker", he said and his smile faded. "I know Gabin is lying. I know what you've planned", he hissed. Torvin noticed that he was breathing heavily. As he looked at the torturer, he almost had to close his eyes. Harlan took a step closer, pointing the knife at Torvin's chest. "I know you are not happy with your situation. I know you want to rebuild your family. And I know you are not a friend of my father", he hissed, leaving Torvin with the desire to run away, before his smile returned. "But, do you know what? That is alright. As a matter of fact, my father is a narrow-minded pisshead. I am willing to give you a chance. You want to be my friend? Well, being my friend has benefits, as Gabin can confirm. And it isn't hard. You just have to prove me that you are like me...", he said. Being like him? How could anyone ever be like him? Torvin looked at Gabin. What had he done to win Harlan Hoare's friendship? Gabin seemed to be a good man, a man with morals. Why was he willing to go that far?

Harlan's gaze hardened. "Me and Holt, we want to do some stuff today. There are some prisoners who really need to confess. Some of them still have fingers and teeth and I think we both agree that this is not supposed to stay like that. You can give us a hand. Figuratively speaking, of course. Or, if you're too weak for that, you can meet me in the evening. My brother Harmund should be here by then and we plan on taking a trip into the Riverlands to

celebrate his arrival at Harrenhal. Meeting some local girls, you know. You're gonna love Harmund, I guarantee...”, he explained. Torvin looked over at Gabin, who avoided his stare. This did not go as planned. He did not like it...

### **[Stay with Harlan and Holt in the dungeons]**

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#### **John**

He opened his eye. Who was he? Now... that was easy. John Gutten. Good. The first step. Where was he? He tried to look up, but the massive headache prevented it. Instead he looked at a soft pillow below his head. Ah... the Hammered Harp... Aylard's Inn... He reached out his hand until he touched soft, warm flesh. Now that was a mightily fine arse... Could be Cass, but to be sure, Gutten had to turn his head... Yes, it was Cass. She was still sleeping and Gutten did his best not to wake her. Poor girl probably hadn't had much sleep last night. It was morning now from what he could tell. As silent as it was possible for him with his headache, Gutten stood up and looked for his trousers. It didn't took him long and he was almost fully dressed, with his black trousers and a simple white shirt. Cass was still asleep. Gutten smiled for a short moment, before his bad mood caught up to him, combined with a terrible headache. What happened last night? There was... yes, he met Lucas. They had talked, but Gutten had been too drunken to actually remember the finer details of the conversation. Still, it was nice to know that the boy was fine. With an uncomfortable feeling, Gutten went to his door and left the room, leaving Cass a few more hours of sleeping. With shaky feet, John entered the inn's main room. He was greeted by Janae, who sat on a table for herself, eating a cold meal of bread, cheese and a hard-boiled egg. Her face was stern and she only gave him a short nod. John smiled at her, his bad mood immediately gone. “Good morning, my maiden fair”, he chuckled and she gave him a cold glare. “We have a problem, John”, she remarked while looking at the door to the kitchen. An old woman walked out of the door. Gunel. Gutten sighed. Gunel was a former whore, but it was hard to believe that she was ever successful in this profession. She was hideous and the worst part was, that she reminded him of his own mother, back in his childhood days on the isle of Orkmont. He knew, she and Aylard were good friends, but Gutten hated her. A feeling that seemed to be mutual.

As he looked at her, she gave him a cold smile. “You are in trouble, John Gutten”, she said. “Your girl, Samantha, she is trying to calm him down. He wanted to smash your head in after he found out” Gutten looked at Janae who raised an eyebrow. “Don't look at me like that, John”, she scoffed. “It is not my fault this time. Lucas screwed up big time”, she remarked. John looked from her to Gunel. “Lucas? What exactly...”, he started to say, but was interrupted by someone walking down the stairs into the main-room. It was Temari, propped by Behara. The mercenaries face was badly swollen, his nose broken badly broken and he could hardly walk without his sister's aid. Gutten jumped up, furiously looking at Gunel. “That was Aylard, right? I swear to the old gods and the new, I...”, he shouted, but was again interrupted when Janae grabbed him by the arm. “Calm down, my bear”, she spoke. Gunel shook his head. “That was the friend of your young knight. The handsome one”, she explained. Gutten looked at Temari who avoided his stare. “He tried to touch my sister”, the mercenary mumbled. Behara sighed and shook her head, barely visible. Gutten felt rage inside of him. He was passed out for a few short hours and Lucas fucked something up, while some asshole almost killed Temari! He took a step closer towards Gunel, who still

smiled and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Stop giving me that smile, whore!", he growled. "You're going to tell me what's going on here, now!"

Gunel's smile stopped. "Careful now, John. You do anything rash and Aylard will have your head on a spike", she hissed, to which Gutten only laughed. "He can try. Listen, I am in no mood to argue with you. You're going to tell me what's happening here, now!", he growled. He looked up again as the kitchen door was opened once more. Aylard Kawl walked out of the room, his son Sawyer with him. The boy was crying and Aylard was visibly shaken too. Behind them, a quiet, calm and almost concerned looking Samantha followed. The innkeepers face was hard as stone, but John saw tears in the man's eyes. What exactly happened? "You...", Aylard growled. "This is all your fucking fault"

John shook his head and stepped back as Aylard continued to walk closer to him. The innkeeper's fists were clenched and Gutten did not want to provoke a fight, especially since he wouldn't win with his current hangover. Not against a strong man as Aylard. "Calm down...", he commanded, while looking at Janae for help. "Aylard calm down and tell me what happened"

The innkeeper gave him a furious glare. "What happened? You want to know what happened? This asshole knight abducted my daughter, that happened!", he shouted. At that point, John lost it. Lucas abduction Lunett Kawl? He could have believed that the other knight would do such a thing, but Lucas? He wouldn't do this, unless... he looked at Janae who likely came to the same conclusion hours ago. "She wanted it", Gutten said. "She wanted to come with him"

If looks could kill, John would have dropped dead. Aylards stare was furious enough to make Gutten flinch. "She is my daughter! She would never do this", he shouted, but sounded like a man trying to convince himself of a lie. Gutten knew men like that. He did it for all his life himself. "She would never do this...", Aylard mumbled again, this time he had tears in his eyes. "You have to bring her back"

Gutten looked at Janae who shook her head. And he agreed with her. He liked Lucas. Despite his young years, he was an experienced fighter and a good friend. But he wasn't part of his men anymore. Gutten wasn't obliged to do this. He had nothing against Aylard, he was even able to relate to him. But this was not his fault and definitely not his problem! He had more important things to do. "I don't think we have to do anything, Aylard", he answered. The innkeeper looked thoroughly shocked. "Wait... so... after I'm housing you and your people for over a week, you just leave me like this?", he stuttered, before his white face turned red again. "Fuck you, Gutten! I can pay you if that is what you want!", he grumbled. Payment? Now the things looked slightly different. This was not his problem, but he was still a mercenary. With the right amount of money, every problem became his. Except... even if he wanted to help, he was still in a contract already. As soon as Jaro and I'Lian would catch up to them, they were obliged to travel to Raylansfair.

But Gutten was proud that he was no cold-hearted bastard. He tried his best to look sad as he answered. "I am sorry, Aylard. I know that must be hard for you. But I can't help you. No matter how much you're paying. The Gutters are in a contract", he explained. Aylard threw his hands in the sky and shook his head in disbelief. "So, first you come here and I let you stay despite your manners. Then you boy screws up and kidnaps my daughter... And now you're refusing to help me? You owe me that much, Gutten!", he explained, his voice now loud and shouting. His son started to cry again, which caused Gunel to softly hug him.

Gutten took a step closer. He was a bit taller than Aylard and the innkeeper's active time as a soldier ended a few years back. He was a bit out of shape. He wasn't weak, but he was no match for Gutten when he was angry. "I owe you nothing, Aylard...", John said as calm as possible.

A slight cough made him look up. Samantha looked at him, her face sorrowful. "I would go...", she mumbled. "I would do it. Without payment, if you allow it. I am the best rider among the Gutters. I can catch up to them, maybe even before they reach Oldtown. I can find her and I can bring her back in no time. Only if you allow it of course", she said. John raised an eyebrow, to which she gave him a slight shrug. "Family is important", she simply explained. Gutten looked at her, unsure how he should react. She was part of the group, part of the contract and a damn good fighter. He could use her in Raylansfair. On the other hand, she could catch up to him again. And it looked like something she really wanted to do...

**[Don't allow it]**

## **Ellena**

Talea looked at her father with a worried face, her arms akimbo, letting out a sigh. The captain, usually a stern, but calm man had a slightly red face and he was looking at his daughter, at Ellena and at the tall, thin man in front of him. Patrick Tanner, the harbormaster, arrived at the Pale Princess in the morning, accompanied by a mean looking thug and a bunch of official documents. They had talked, in perfect and fluent Westerosi, far better than Ellenas own Westerosi was. However, she was still able to understand what this conversation was about. The Pale Prince was in trouble.

Five days had passed, in which she barely spoke to Terroma. The old man had kept largely to himself during this time, staying in his room or taking trips around the city. Alone. Most of the times, Ellena hadn't seen him leaving, only to notice that he was missing, before he finally came back a few hours later. Terroma always came back. But something changed after the incident in the alleyway. His smile seemed a bit sad, he seemed to be in thoughts most of the time, his easygoingness appeared forced from time to time. He was not a simple merchant, like she suspected at first. Simple merchants weren't able to kill three men like this. Sure, they had deserved it. They had almost killed the knight, who was still recovering in a small room aboard the Pale Princess. They had been beasts, from what Ellena could tell. But Terroma... he had butchered them. She wasn't afraid, but still... he hid something from her. The evening after the incident, she had asked him if he was a Faceless Man. Terroma had only laughed. "Sweet Ellena", he had said. "If I am a Faceless Man, do you think I would tell you?" After that she hadn't asked anymore. She wasn't afraid of him. He was still Terroma. But she was wary.

She had spent more time with Talea, who apparently tried her best to teach her in some way. The captain's daughter took her to meetings, introduced her to the wonders of accounting and bookkeeping. It was pretty boring and Ellena often found her mind astray. Her father had tried to teach her stuff like this as well for years until he had finally given up on it. However, accompanying Talea had it's upsides as well. The captain's daughter was pleasant company and for every calculation, she also learned a few new interesting words and got to spend some time around the sailors. There was Moreo, a green-bearded Tyroshi, who had a bad

temper but a wonderful singing voice. Then there was Lane, a pudgy, bald man from Myr, who was the closest the Pale Princess had for a real cook. He always gave her something to eat when he met her and Ellena was polite enough to eat it, despite Lane being a horrible cook. A hairy man from Ib who went by the name of Jeggo taught her a few swear words in the strange language of the Ibbenese. She had some interesting talks with the wounded knight. Jaron had been in a bad condition for some days, but the medico was certain that he would recover completely soon. Three of his ribs had been broken, alongside his shield arm, but his armor saved his life. Most of the times, he was sleeping in his room, but when he was awake, he often talked to Ellena and was even able to walk again. And despite Terroma not spending any time with her this week, it hadn't been too bad. At least until today. Today, the problems started. The Pale Princess wanted to leave again, this time travelling to Raylansfair in the northern Reach. But in the early morning, an envoy from the harbormaster arrived, prohibiting the ship to leave Oldtown. The captain had a long talk with the envoy and send him away. A second envoy came, accompanied by a bodyguard. The captain had a talk with him as well, this time accompanied by Moreo. More words had been exchanged, some of them had been swear words. The word 'fuck' had been said in several variations. Finally, the harbormaster himself had to come. Patrick Tanner wasn't old, likely even younger than the captain. But his hair was already completely grey, his skin pale and slightly wrinkled. He was a soft-spoken man, his voice reminding Ellena of brittle paper and dry ink. The captains melodic voice was a pleasant contrast for this, the familiar accent sounding comfortable.

"Tell me again, Tanner. Why can't we leave? I have filled out all necessary documents, your men have searched the ship after we arrived and once as we wanted to leave. We don't have any smuggled goods with us. Keeping us here is against the law", the captain said, visibly shaken. Tanner shook his head. "I am afraid, this is where you're wrong, captain", he said politely. "The law prohibits you from leaving" He reached into his pocket and showed them a small sheet of paper. Official looking paper. Ellena saw two seals on it, the bigger one clearly depicting the Hightower, the smaller one depicting several dots. "This is signed and sealed by Ser Maron Mullendore, personally tasked by Lord Hightower to keep the city safe. You're prohibited from leaving on his decree", Tanner explained

The captain let out a sigh. "I understand, Tanner. However, I am done with your Westerosi bullshit. Why don't we shorten this? How much does this Mullendore want?", he asked, putting his hands on the top of his desk. Tanner shook his head. "Maybe it is common to do such things in Braavos, dear captain. But Ser Maron is a steady and honorable man. He despises people who try to bribe him" Tanner's voice got slightly louder, sounded almost irritated.

Talea cleared her throat and put her hands up. "And we never wanted to imply this. My father only wanted to ask what Ser Maron wants from us. Clearly he wouldn't keep us here without a reason, would he?", she said and gave him a sweet smile. Talea wasn't a pretty girl and her smile looked rather dull. But she wasn't ugly either, she was slim, had bright eyes and fine teeth. Ellena could also imagine that a man like Tanner hadn't seen a young woman smiling at him in months. She noticed a subtle change in his face. The irritated tone in his voice was gone and he gave the captain's daughter an approving gaze. "You are right, mylady. You all seem like good people, so I will tell you what I know. A note, which had been passed to me earlier, informed me that your ship is part of an investigation. Apparently, three men have been killed, men who are in service of a dangerous criminal who goes by the



name of 'Butterfly'. Thanks to an anonymous tip, the city guard assumes that the culprit is among your crew. Ser Maron intends to bring this Butterfly to justice and would have killed these men either way, but he severely disapproves of vigilantism. Until you haven't settled the matter with him, I am afraid I can't let you leave", he explained. At least he had the decency to sound genuinely polite. Ellena gulped and looked at Talea. She had told her about the night and had no doubt that they both were thinking the same. Terroma had told her that helping Jaron could lead to trouble. And no the trouble came, albeit not in form of a vengeful criminal, but in form of the law.

Tanner looked at Talea, his thin lips forming a stilted smile. "Of course, Ser Maron is a reasonable man. If you are able to help him with his investigations, I am convinced he will let you leave", he explained, before taking a bow. "However, I am inclined to leave now. There is a lot of work that won't do itself", he chuckled suddenly. The captain gave him a short, annoyed nod. "Good day, Tanner", he sighed, watching the harbormaster leaving, as quick as he came. When the man was gone, the captain glared furiously at Talea and Ellena. "That's all about Terroma and this hedge knight! I knew it was a bad idea to let him stay aboard the Princess", he hissed, while Talea shook her head. "That was not Jarons fault and certainly not Ser Terromas! He saved his life, for fucks sake!", she answered sternly. The captain threw his arms into the air. "He did! And now we have trouble with the local city guard!", he shouted, before looking at Ellena. She realized that she just got pale. The captain's gaze softened. "Sorry. I am sorry. I don't want to shout like that. But it is undeniable that we have a problem. Ser Maron Mullendore apparently wants the man who killed these three thugs. So, my proposal would be that we sell him out. I am going to meet with Mullendore and I tell him the truth. I tell him that Terroma saved a man and that this man is now recovering aboard the Pale Princess. I guess that Mullendore wants to speak to both of them", he explained.

Talea narrowed her eyes. "So, we rat them out like that? We don't know what this knightly jerkass is going to do to them!", she said and stood next to Ellena. "You don't want that either, do you?", she asked. Ellena gulped. Yes, they were in trouble because Terroma killed these men. But he had only killed them because she made him do it. He never wanted that. She looked up and into the captain's eyes "This is not his fault...", she said with shaky voice. "It is mine. I made him save Jaron. Please, Terroma only protected him and me"

The captain shook his head. "You are a little girl. Little girls shouldn't be involved in murder and vigilantism. I am not going to tell Ser Maron anything about you. But I will tell him about Terroma and Ser Jaron. I don't think Jaron has anything to fear. I also don't think that Terroma is in danger. After all, he basically defended himself while preventing a crime. Yet, Mullendore will want to speak to both of them", he explained. Talea shook her head.

"Terroma is a friend and Ser Jaron is a guest. Do what you want, *captain*, but should something happen to them, I won't forgive you", she said. Her voice was as cold as ice. The captain gave her a sad look, before looking at Ellena. "Please, Ellena. I want to talk to my daughter. Alone"

Ellena nodded. She understood stuff like this. Her father had some stern talks with her as well. Yes, she understood. And she also understood what the captain was trying to do. But that didn't mean that she agreed with him. Terroma was her friend. He had saved a life and now he was about to be interrogated by a man she knew nothing about. This Mullendore could be a friendly man, from what she knew. But he could also be a bloodthirsty madman who would gladly kill Terroma for fun. Her father once told her that people in the highest

positions were very often truly evil. It wasn't right to give Terrorma to such a man. He had only helped! As she walked out of the captain's quarters and down the hallway, her gaze fell on Terromas door. From what she knew, he was aboard the Princess right now. She could warn him and Ser Jaron, but should she risk to anger the captain like that?

**[Warn both]**

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### **Jenna**

Jenna took a deep breath, looking at Septon Corbins puffy, dolorous face. The Septon wasn't smiling, he rarely ever did. But he still managed to look quite friendly, reassuring and calming. A self-righteous hypocrite. But a Septon. And the only ally she could hope for. "Harris murdered him", she whispered. Septon Corbins face slightly changed. Worry was his default expression, but now she saw something else. Anger? Resignation? The Septon sighed. "I have feared that much. Tell me what happened exactly", he asked. Jenna shivered with relief. For a moment she had feared that the Septon would immediately tell Harris about her insubordination. "He and Ser Ilhan had a fierce dispute. Ser Ilhan accused Harris about ruling unjustifiably. He wanted to inform the king about something. Harris didn't want this...", she explained, before taking a pause to breathe again. She noticed tears in her eyes. Not now! Not in front of the Septon. Corbin shook his head. "Oh Harris... Tell me, how do you know this?", he asked. His tone of voice sent shivers down her spine. She remembered one of his sermons, in which he preached about how the Seven hate dishonourable behaviour. Did eavesdropping count as dishonourable behaviour? "I... I listened. I wasn't supposed to do that, Septon Corbin, I am sorry!", she stuttered. The Septons face got a stern expression and he raised his index finger. "Jenna, the Warrior hates dishonourable behaviour", he lectured. Jenna looked down, on the ground. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't a warrior. That Harris was the monster here and that her eavesdropping didn't even matter. That they had to go after Harris and that the Septon needed to do something. But she stayed quiet, while Septon Corbin looked at her with a stern gaze. Finally, he sighed. "But I guess we have to focus on the more important task first. I do expect that you pray for forgiveness the next seven nights", he demanded. Jenna gave him a weak nod and continued. "Ser Ilhan drew his sword. I think he wanted to take Harris as a captive until the king decided in this matter. Then, Lady Halla discovered me and dragged me into the room. Ilhan got distracted and... and Harris...", she said, stopping as her voice started to crack. Septon Corbin gave her an understanding nod. "It is okay, child. I will contact the High Septon. He will be able to call the king to Raylansfair. The King will decide in this matter. Until then, it is important that you stay quiet about this. Not a word to anyone, do you understand me?", he explained. Jenna looked at him with relief. Septon Corbin would help her! Out of all people, Septon Corbin was the one to help her! She gave him a bright smile. "Yes. Oh yes, Septon Corbin", she said, resisting the urge to hug him. "Come on now, we don't want to keep Harris waiting, do we?", the Septon answered. For a moment, Jenna felt shivers running down her spine. Why Harris? What did Septon Corbin wanted to do with Harris now? Quite sluggishly, the Septon raised from his chair and walked towards the door, letting Harris and Halla in. The acting lord seemed to be concerned. He looked at Jenna with a stern face. And in the moment she looked into his eyes, she was certain that he could see what she had just done. Harris smiled at her and at Septon Corbin. "Well, Septon... Are you convinced of my innocence in this matter now?", he asked. Jenna gulped. Harris would never attack a man of the Faith, not even he would ever stoop so low, there was simply no way... Ser Ilhan

had thought like this, she remembered. He had believed that Harris would act honorable. She remembered Ser Ilhan, lying on the ground, motionless, in a pool of blood. No... Septon Corbin gave him a nod. "Indeed, Harris. The poor girl was clearly shaken, but I think this is only understandable after what happened. But she convinced me of your innocence. She had seen that Ser Ilhan had drawn his sword, that he was about to attack you", he explained. Jenna carefully watched him. Nothing on his face gave his surprise away, except maybe a very brief eye movement towards Jenna. "Like I said, Corbin. The Seven gave us truth today", he exclaimed, before giving Jenna an approving smile. He walked around the table, putting his hands on Jennas shoulders. Jenna felt how she clenched her hands. "I am glad you were able to help me, Jenna", Harris whispered. "Your dedication for the truth must be rewarded. I have heard your father is missing, right?", he said, his words sounding sweet, but barely hiding the steel behind them. Jenna noticed that she was holding her breath. Her father! What did Harris know about that? "Yes, m'lord", she mumbled. Harris put his hands up again, away from her shoulders and walked around the table, so that he was able to look her in the eyes. "I am sorry to hear that. As long as I am your lord, no one will get missing in Raylansfair. I will inform the city guard. They will search for him and they will find him", he promised. Jenna looked at him in a mixture of confusion and amazement. She could see his face. That was real gratitude he just showed. Jenna gave him a forced smile. "Thank you m'lord", she answered, without stopping to stare at him. Why would he help her? Was he really grateful for this? "M'lord... May I go now?", she asked, still surprised. Harris gave her a benevolent smile. "Of course, Jenna. Take the day off. Tomorrow, my guard will have found your father and brought him back to you, I promise", he said, before looking at Corbin. "Septon Corbin, I think we should continue our talk in private" The Septon gulped, but gave Harris a smile. "Of yourse, mylord", he said. Jenna did not look back as she left the room.

With quick steps, she went back to her room, not able to hold back her tears on the way. One of the guards, a young woman with shoulder-length brown hair looked at her with a questioning look. Jenna walked past her before she could ask her something. She didn't want to talk now. With every step she walked, she realized how horrible the talk had been. She realized how great the danger had been. She had put her trust in Septon Corbin, but she had no confirmation that he wasn't reporting back to Harris right now. And her father... she knew that Harris was capable of being involved in his disappearance. Ser Ilhan, lying on the floor, in a pool of his own blood...

Completely in tears she reached her room, only to see her door open. Instantly, her wariness returned. Someone was in her room. Someone potentially dangerous... With an uneasy feeling she realized that her door had no lock. And a small person could climb through the window. Maybe Harris wanted to kill her, now or later in her sleep. She couldn't stay here! She had to find out who the intruder in her room was and then she had to run. She had to leave the castle, as far away from Harris as possible! Jenna slowly walked up to the room, looked inside and took a relieved breath. She saw Carma, who was just making her bed. Her friend noticed her and gave her a worried look. "Jenna? What is wrong with you?", she asked, walking up to her. "Has it been that bad?" Jenna managed to give her a weak nod, before she started to sob. "More than that, Carma. It has been horrible", she managed to say. Carma gave her a kind smile. "Do you want to tell me?", she offered. Talking to Carma always helped her. Always made her feel better. Despite an age-gap of only eight years,

Carma almost seemed to be her mother in many ways. They had the same smile, the same eyes. And Jenna couldn't pull her into this! She just had to leave!

"No... not this time. I have to leave the castle for a few days. I can't stay here. Not after Ser Ilhan", she explained. Carma's smile faded. "You can't mean that, Jenna. Where would you go?", she asked. Yes... where would she go? Her father's farm wasn't far. She could hide until the king arrived. But she would be all alone. If something happened to her, there would be no one to help her...

"I don't know... I just don't know. I just have to get away from all of this. From Lord Harris. From Septon Corbin and Lady Halla. From this castle, where everything reminds me of Maester Eaton and Ser Ilhan. I have to get away from all this death, Carma", she said. Carma's smile returned. "You want to leave the castle for a few days?", she asked. Jenna gave her an irritated nod. She had just said that! "Because, if you just want to leave, you could come with me. We have a spare bedroom in our house. You have to meet Urid! And the kids will love you", she smiled. Jenna looked at her and wanted nothing more than to say yes. But would it be risky for Carma? Or was she just paranoid?

Paranoid little Jenna Harking, all alone, who already caused Ser Ilhan's death and likely endangered Septon Corbin as well...

**[Accept Carma's offer]**

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## **Jaron**

Jaron raised his head as he heard the door getting opened. He instantly regretted it as he felt his ribs. Even though there was no medico, he knew he wasn't supposed to feel his ribs. A painful sigh forced its way out of his throat. Fucking Butterfly and his fucking thugs! He had spent several of the last days asleep, sometimes with help of the milk of the poppy. How exactly was the Burned Man able to drink it like that?

"Jaron?", a familiar voice asked, a soft, young voice. Ellena had been almost his only conversational partner during the last five days. The times he was awake, she had asked him all kinds of stuff. His life as a knight. His dreams and goals. She had sounded not too thrilled when he told her about his daily life. This was hardly the first time he had broken his arm, neither was he a stranger to broken ribs. Apparently she had hoped for tales of adventure and he could hardly blame her. After all, he had hoped for more glorious tales too. But neither Ellena, nor he himself had ever heard about the tale of the knight who almost got killed in a nameless alleyway.

"Jaron, you have to get up", Ellena said and the knight finally lifted his head. She looked quite distressed, her eyes widened in anxiety and Jaron noticed that she was shivering. "Is everything alright, Ellena?", he asked. She shook her head and Jaron could tell that there was something wrong. "You have to leave", she mumbled. "You have to leave, because the captain wants to give you to the city guard. They want to interrogate you", she explained. Jaron gulped. Interrogating him? He had been attacked, he had done nothing wrong! Except... except the fact that he had allied himself with a known criminal. Perhaps getting interrogated by the city guard wouldn't be a good idea. He gave Ellena a thankful smile, that quickly turned into a pained sigh as he tried to get up. For a short moment, he had to lay down again, holding his ribs, breathing heavily. And he was tempted to call for the sweet milk. "Gods... I don't think I'm ready for this", he moaned. Ellena rolled her eyes and quickly

jumped to his side. "Come on, Jaron you have get up. It's not that hard", she hissed. "I get up every morning without all this moans and groans"

Jaron gave her a weak grin. "Yes, but you don't have any broken ribs, do you?", he mumbled, to which she raised an eyebrow. "No, but I am only half your age and not a knight. I bet Symeon Star-Eyes had never moaned about broken ribs", she answered. Jaron shook his head "No, he was too busy being blind", he said, but knew in an instant that he just gave her a perfect opportunity to counter that. "True. And he never cried about being blind, he put sapphires in his eye sockets and killed two men with every strike. Do you think he would be a legendary hero now if he had whined about a few broken ribs?", she scoffed. Jaron rolled with his eyes. Yes, he knew what she tried to do. Ser Matthos had used a similar tactic to motivate him. Then again, Ser Matthos had been four times her age. That girl was too clever for her own good. But he did her the favour.

He made a second attempt, ignoring the feeling of his ribs bursting in pain, ignoring the worrying cracking sound, ignoring the numbing agony. Yes, she was right. He wanted to become a hero? Well, heroes never whined about broken bones. And it could have been worse easily! And finally, he managed to stand up. Ellena gave him a cheerful smile as he stood upright, his legs a little bit shaky, his ribs almost killing him, but standing. "See? It's not that hard. I mean, I don't even expect from you to replace your eyes with sapphires", she said with a smirk.

Jaron went a few steps forwards, his legs still a bit shaky, but with every step he felt his strength coming back. "That is... very kind of you, Ellena", he groaned, before looking around for his belongings. His sword was in his room, leaning against a wall. His armour wasn't seen anywhere. As if she had read his thoughts, Ellena shook her head. "They wanted to give it to a blacksmith for repairs. Terroma wanted to pay for it. It's currently in the storage room. But there is no time for that! Grab your sword and get out of here before the captain comes to you", she ordered. Jaron had only enough time to give her an annoyed nod. She was exactly the little sister he never wanted! Still, he grabbed his sword and opened the door, before he remembered something else. "Ellena... what is with Terroma?", he asked. He hadn't talked that much to the older man, but Terroma had saved his life.

Ellena's smile was replaced by a frown, as she avoided his gaze for a moment. "I have to speak to him. But I thought you're probably needing all the time you can get to get off the ship", she explained. Jaron wanted to say something, wanted to ask her what happened with Terroma. How could an old man like him take down three armed thugs? But he noticed the expression in her face and decided to stay silent. It was clear that Ellena and Terroma had some sort of connection. But Jaron could also think that her seeing the old man mowing down three armed men had left a certain impression, one that would be hard to change. Right now, the girl looked at him with determination. "But first I'm getting you out of here", she said decisively, before walking past Jaron. The knight followed her, considerably slower. Gradually, he made his way to the upper deck, looking towards the harbour. As he turned around to look at her, Ellena gave him a sad smile. "I hope you stay safe, Jaron", she whispered and for a moment it appeared as if she had almost hugged him. Thankfully for his ribs, she didn't. Jaron smiled at her, as cheerful as possible. "Don't you worry. One this is sorted out, I'll come back. You still have my armour after all", he said. Ellena chuckled. "Yeah... about that... If you take too long, we might end up selling it, to make up for you never showing up again", she answered sternly. Jaron had a painful chuckle all the way down to the harbour.

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As he walked through the masses of people who spent their day at the harbour, he thought about his future. He got lucky, he still had a future. But still... he entered the city with nothing but a horse, his armour, sword and a bit of money. Now all he had left was his sword. The captain had send men to the Drunken Septon, looking for his belongings. They returned with nothing. Either the Burned Man had taken care of that, or Butterfly found it first. Either way, his journey into this city had been nothing but a bad investment so far. Maybe it was about time that he turned his back on the city, leaving the Burned Man to himself. With the city guard on his heels, it would be for the best. Yes... it would be for the best...

A familiar face in the crowd caught his attention. She wore a plain hooded cloak, but it was still hard to miss her. The strands of dark brown hair with the reddish highlights that were still visible underneath the cloak caught his attention. Harpy was striking in her appearance, with the exotic beauty of a Ghiscari, paired with the fair skin of a Westerosi, or perhaps a Lysene. She wasn't someone who could hide easily. But she saw him the same moment he saw her, her dark eyes widened for a moment. And she wasn't alone. Walking arm in arm with her was a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, taller than Jaron, more muscular, with a pretty face. Now... who was that? The other man noticed Jarons stare and gave him a slight smirk.

Harpy shook his arm off and came a bit closer. "Ser Jaron? What exactly are you doing here?", she asked in disbelief. Jaron took quite a bit of delight in the fact that he had taken her by surprise. But as he wanted to answer, he felt something else inside of him. He had been on this ship for five days. And not even once had the Burned Man contacted him! "I could ask you the same, mylady", Jaron hissed. "What are you doing here?" He noticed that his voice sounded a bit more angry than he wanted to be and Harpy's face darkened.

The other man caught up to Harpy. Jaron noticed that he was armed. A fine longsword and a second blade, a bit shorter. "Is there any problem, Harpy?", he asked. So, who was that guy? A bodyguard? Harpy didn't even look at him. "What I am doing here? I was on my way to visit a certain knight who we thought to be dead the past week. That would be you, in case you hadn't notice", she answered. "After the Burned Man spent the past week trying his best to locate you before Butterfly does it, I take the considerable risk and leave the hideout, only accompanied by Martin here" she gave the other man a handwave. Ah, Martin... "And when I come here, I find out that the brave knight already walks around the city like nothing happened and has the nerves to ask me what I am doing here", she hissed. Yes, apparently Jaron had hit a nerve with his question. He opened his mouth for a considerably more friendly answer, as he saw Harpy's eyes widening. She said a single word, a single short and harsh word in guttural Ghiscari. Jaron didn't even need a translation for this. Words like this existed in every language and they always mean the same. She took a step closer, almost hugging him and grabbed his healthy arm. "Turn around slowly. I'll stand behind your back. Don't move. Martin, stand to Jaron's right. Make sure he won't see me", she whispered.

As Jaron turned around, he felt Harpys hand grabbing his healthy arm. She was shivering. Down the harbour, a few dozen feet away from them, walked a man, accompanied by two others. He was one of the men who were always accompanied, but never accompanying. He wasn't exactly tall, in fact he was a bit shorter than Jaron, with dark brown, almost black hair and quite pale skin. Optically, he wasn't that imposing. But the way he moved through the crowd, making lesser men step aside, the way he looked at the peasants, making them flinch... This man was dangerous.

"Who is he?", Jaron managed to ask. The other man... Martin?... let out a mocking chuckle. "Fucking Fang of Shadows that's who he is", he hissed. Harpy let out a sigh and Jaron felt her hand clenching. "Samuel Harrington", she explained. "The Fang of Shadows. Never heard of him?" Jaron shook his head and Martin started to grin. "Come on man, don't bullshit us. Every mercenary in Reach knows that guy", he scoffed. Jaron gave him a glare. "I am no mercenary", he stated. Well, technically that was true...

Martin's smile faded. "Oh, I'm sorry Ser Jaron. I forgot, you're truly such a marvellous knight", he growled. Before Jaron could answer he felt Harpy's hand on his broken ribs. She didn't hurt him, in fact she barely touched them. But the message was clear. "Don't say a word. Don't let Martin provoke you. If the Fang notices us, we're all dead", she whispered. Jaron gave her a nod and watched the man. "His name is Samuel Harrington. He is a mercenary", she explained, leading to another chuckle from Martin. "That's a bit too easy, mylady Harpy. Calling him a mercenary is like calling Galladon of Morne a knight. The Fang is a legend among mercenaries", he added. Even though Jaron could not see her face, he could almost feel her glaring at Martin. "I was about to add that, thank you", she hissed, before continuing her explanation "Samuel Harrington, known as 'The Fang of Shadows'. One of the best you can hire for money, at least in this part of the known world. The only associate of Butterfly we know about"

Jaron gulped. This man was working for Butterfly? "Why haven't you killed him, if you know that he works for Butterfly?", he asked. Harpy put her hand on his shoulder. "It's not that we tried, Ser Jaron", she explained. Martin took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "We lost twelve men. Good people. Friends", he added.

"Eventually the Burned Man decided that Harrington wasn't worth losing another dozen. Right now, he is more useful to us alive than he is dead. We know him. We keep an eye on him. We learn about some of Butterfly's moves. If we kill Harrington, we lose this possibility" Harpy's voice sounded sad for a moment, while Martin looked at the man with anger. "As soon as I have the possibility, I'm going to put a sword through his throat. Don't ask me to hold back, Harpy", he hissed.

Jaron saw how the man approached the ships. What was this Fang doing here? Looking for him, maybe? "And Butterfly keeps up with an associate you know about?", he asked. Martin nodded slowly. "Probably. But Harrington is too good for that. Butterfly knows, the moment he lets the Fang go, the Burned Man makes an offer. Believe me, you don't want that guy against you", he said.

Yes, Jaron could believe that... He took a step forwards as he realized where Harrington was heading to, leading Harpy to gasp in sudden shock. The Princess! He was heading towards the Pale Princess! As he stepped forwards, Harpy caught up to him, grabbing his healthy arm. "No!", she whispered. "Butterfly only uses him when he has nothing to hide. Harrington won't slaughter them. He will come for you. He will see that you aren't there and he will leave. If your friends don't do anything stupid, they're all going to survive. Please, don't give him what he wants. Don't throw your life away for nothing"

Martin's smile returned. "My, my, Lady Harpy, you sound worried", he chuckled. Again, Jaron didn't even need to see her glare. "Of course I do, dimwit. You know what Butterfly would do to him", she hissed. Martin gave her an apologizing nod. "Aye, mylady", he said before looking at Jaron. "You should listen to her. If you go anywhere near that ship, they will get you. They will bring you to Butterfly. And you will die. Slowly. Some parts of you might die earlier than others"

Jaron let out a sigh, followed by a short shiver of pain. Fucking ribs! Fucking Butterfly! But deep down, he knew that Harpy was right. He was without armour. He was alone. And he had to fight against a man who oozed danger with every movement. Still, he had to close his eyes as he saw Harrington boarding the Pale Princess. Ellena...

As he turned around, Harpy gave him a consoling smile. "He won't kill them. The Burned Man has half the city guard in his pocket. Butterfly pays the other half, but still, he can't do something like that, not in broad daylight", she said. Jaron shook his head. "The people there... I owe them my life. Ellena and Terroma. If anything happens to them, I'm going to kill him", he answered. Harpy's smile faded. "And I will help you. If that convinces you to come with me now instead of throwing your life away, I will help you", she promised. Her dark eyes had a hard glare on them as she grabbed his arm. "We're going to one of our hideouts. Now. We have to plan our next steps. Some things happened the past week. None of them were pretty. Things have changed tremendously", she explained and linked arms with him. As she noticed his surprised stare, she smiled a devious grin. "People are quick to overlook a happy couple. Just smile, Ser Jaron. Even Martin managed to do that"

The mercenary laughed. "And it was a torture with every step we made, mylady. Remember, Ser Jaron. One wrong move and the Burned Man will roast your balls", he grinned. Harpy laughed, a clear and bright laugh, completely unfitting to the accomplice of the Burned Man. "I have to apologize, Ser Jaron. He is terrible!", she smiled. Jaron found it hard to smile back, given the circumstances. But he had to admit, as he walked down the alleyways of Oldtown, he felt better than he had for days. Still, his thoughts wandered back to the Pale Princess... And to Butterfly. Who was that man? Was it even a man? Jaron knew only one thing for sure: He wouldn't leave this city as long as Butterfly was still breathing! But right now... right now he only wanted to rest again. His ribs weren't fully healed, his left arm was numb and it would take weeks until he would be able to use it again. But it could have been worse

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They stopped next to a small door, leading into one of the tall buildings in Oldtown's lower city. Jaron knew these kind of buildings, he was born in a similar one. Of course, the house he was born in has been a whorehouse, but it has been strikingly similar from the looks. This house was obviously home to the poorest of Oldtown, people who barely had enough to live under a roof. Harpy led him inside the building, into a plain hallway and up a small staircase, into the second floor. There she opened a door without a lock, leading into a rundown complex of rooms. She looked at Jaron and after a short moment shook his arm off. "I assume you can walk the rest without my aid", she said and walked into a small adjacent room, which led to a small chuckle from Martin. Jaron gave him a cold glare. This man got on his nerves pretty fast! "You find everything funny, don't you?", he asked. Martin's chuckle intensified. "Oh, come on, Ser Jaron. You look like I kicked your dog. You should have seen your stupid ass grin all the way. The bastard knight, arm in arm with Lady Harpy. You have any intentions with her? Well, sorry to disappoint you, but that's just her being nice. The Burned Man keeps her for a reason, right?", he asked. His smile got brighter and Jaron resisted the urge to punch him. Instead he noticed a dirty sofa and walked towards it. Intentions? Like in romantic intentions? Sure, there was worse company than Harpy. She wasn't bad, for a criminal. But how did Martin get this impression? With a relieved sigh, Jaron sat down on the sofa.

"Don't let him provoke you, Ser Jaron. Sometimes only he thinks he's funny. In your language you may call him 'asshole'", Harpy's voice sounded. Apparently the walls were



thinner than it seemed! She walked into the room again, carrying a small tray with three cups on them. "And the Burned Man keeps me, because he wouldn't survive a day without his Harpy watching over him", she proclaimed, with pride in her voice.

Martin let out a bright laugh. "I'm just kidding you, Ser Jaron", he said and sat down next to Jaron. "Why don't we introduce ourselves? My name is Martin Wilshere. I may not look like it, but I was born in Braavos. Both parents have been Westerosi, so I figured I might try my luck here", he introduced himself, grabbing one of the cups and taking a sip, before making a disgusted grimace. "Ugh, is it this Arbor stuff? Tastes like someone pissed in it", he scoffed. Harpy raised an eyebrow and looked at Jaron. "Martin is an okay guy, if you keep up with him", she explained. "But I can understand when the last thing you want right now is spending time with us. Himani will meet us here in a few hours. He is reliable and already knows you, so I figured he would be good for the things I have planned", she explained and grabbed one of the cups. As she took a sip, she made a grimace as well. "That's indeed not the Arbor stuff that should be here. The Burned Man likes to give his guests a bit of comfort, but the urchins tend to steal all the valuable stuff. I have to speak to Himani about that once he is here"

Jaron looked at Martin who gave him a friendly smile. "Listen, we may have started wrong, yeah? I understand if you don't want to talk. Dealing with Harrington will be difficult for your friends, I'm not lying. If you don't want to talk, there is a bed in the other room. You can sleep for a few hours, until Himani is here, I guess. But I'd like to learn more about the newest member in our small group of outlaws", he said.

Jaron looked at Harpy, who gave him an approving smile, then towards the door. Yes, he was tired...

### **[Stay awake and talk to Martin and Harpy]**

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### **Maya**

She gave Ser Aldrik her most furious look. He didn't even flinch. "Don't make this any worse, Ambassador", he said softly. His direwolf started to growl at Gregar, who almost looked like he wanted to growl back. Irving shivered and Maya was almost sure that he was about to piss himself. Finally, she sighed and put her hand under her cloak, pulling out one of her daggers, before handing it to Ser Aldrik. It was the dagger with the sigil of Runestone on it and Aldrik looked at it with admiration. "This is a fine weapon, Ambassador. I'll make sure that nothing happens to it", he said and Maya wasn't sure if he was mocking her or if he genuinely tried to be friendly. "This is all?", he asked. She gave him a nod. She wouldn't speak to this mercenary knight more than she had to. "Very well, Ambassador", Aldrik said, before presenting his arm, as if he was expecting that she would link arms with him like a proper lady. Maya gave him only a cold glare, which seemed to be enough for Ser Aldrik to get the hint. He said nothing, just started to walk the path that lead to the Dyre Den, his direwolf next to him. The old castle towered on the cliffs above her, its three crooked towers giving it a derelict appearance. The path itself was narrow, spiral and seemed to lead in a huge bow around the castle, up to the cliff. Before she could start to walk herself, one of the guards grabbed her arm and started to drag her with him.

Irving walked next to her, up to the cliffs. Apparently no guard was needed to force him up the way. Gregar made up for this, since it took two men to drag him up. "So... do you have a plan? I mean, I don't want to sound pessimistic here, but if you don't have a plan...", Irving

started, but Maya silenced him with a handwave. "Irving... Can you just shut up please?", she asked. She had to think. Yes, she was armed. She wasn't a bad fighter. But it was her experience that told her that she had no chance against a knight in full armour. Ser Aldrik slowed down, so that she was able to catch up to him. He gave her a friendly smile. "I guarantee your safety, Ambassador", he promised. Maya gave him a frown. He wasn't Lord Brune, just a mercenary posing as a knight. He couldn't guarantee shit.

"You see, there is nothing of danger in Dyre Den. Lord Brune is a just man", Aldrik continued, which spawned a mocking giggle from Gregar. "You're trying to convince yourself, aren't you, Wolver? The Lord Brune I know is a resentful, whiny bitch", he growled, followed by a pained sigh as one of the guards punched him in the face. Ser Aldrik gave both of them a short glare, before looking at Maya again. "Lord Brune is a just man", he repeated, but Maya noticed that he didn't sound too sure himself. With a handwave, he pointed down at the Valley. "I'm living here for six years now, first in service to House Crabb, now in service to House Brune and this sight still amazes me. They don't have valleys like this in the north. The nature is lovely...", he explained.

Maya did him the favour and looked down to the valley, a densely forested and foggy area. It had a certain beauty to it, Maya had to admit. But it also seemed cold, hostile and dangerous. She preferred the rugged and rocky hills of the Vale, where she was able to see possible dangers miles away. In these forests, anything could hide. Armies. Monsters. Worse. A squishing sound, followed by a muffled sigh disturbed her thoughts and made her look to Irving, who made a sour face. When he met her stare, he gave her an annoyed shrug.

"I stepped into nature...", he moaned

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As they came closer, the Dyre Den looked even more pathetic than from afar. At least one of the towers didn't look inhabitable. Two guards stood on the walls above the front gate, but they didn't even bothered with sounding a horn for the approaching guests. Maya noticed the less than terrible equipment. They didn't even wear armour! What guard has no armour? If it weren't for the banner of House Brune, waving above every tower, she would have assumed that this were common bandits. The only person who looked even remotely dangerous was Ser Aldrik. How did Brune even manage pay a man like him? Still, the men on the walls had bows and short swords. Even an inexperienced fighter could kill someone with a sword.

Two guards, clad in worn-down leather, gave Ser Aldrik a nod as he entered the courtyard.

"Send word to Lord Brune! Maya Iresons, Ambassador of Runestone is honouring us with her presence!", he ordered with a sharp tone in his voice. Yes, he was mocking her, wasn't he? Nobody could stay that calm and friendly while basically taking her hostage! But here he was, combining the chivalry of a knight with the ruthlessness of a kidnapper. He smiled at her, while she only gave him a furious look. "After you, Ambassador", he said, pointing towards the so-called great hall of the Dyre Den. It resided directly on the cliff, right between two towers, one of it being in almost remarkably good shape, the other one looking dangerously crooked. The hall itself was taller than most houses in Gulltown, she had to admit that. But it was smaller than the smallest piss chamber in Runestone. From the amount of people stationed at the courtyard, Maya calculated that the Dyre Den was home to thirty or forty people. Not many, but more than enough to keep her against her will... Wolver's men grabbed Gregar and Irving, who protested with loud and panicked screams and dragged them off to the crooked tower, while Maya looked at Wolver. "They will be

brought to one of our holding cells as long as you talk to Lord Brune. Nothing will happen to them and I will make sure that they are treated with kindness”, he promised and part of Maya believed him, or at least wanted to believe him.

The doors to the great hall opened with a loud creak. Behind them lay a dimly lit room, barely enough to hold thirty men. Lord Brune was one of the more powerful lords of Crackclaw Point, able to levy an army of several hundred men from his smallfolk, but his hall implied something else. Two small fireplaces were enough to make it more than just uncomfortably warm and Maya had the urge to put her cloak down. But she wouldn't allow herself this weakness. The cloak was given to her for a reason. Without it she would feel naked in this hall.

The lord of Dyre Den sat in the middle of the room, on a large chair that was barely able to hold him. Trymon Brune was fat enough to make her wonder how a petty lord could get that large. He was old, possibly three times her age, with full, grey hair and a puffy face with a prominent chin. And he was remarkably well-clothed, wearing something that could be blue myrish silk. In his left hand he was holding a cup of wine. And he was smiling as he saw her. “Ser Aldrik, what have you brought me here?”, he giggled, standing up from his chair with considerable effort. She didn't like his smile. Why could she never meet someone whose smile she actually liked? But while the Bronze Lords smile was completely insincere, reminding her of daggers, Lord Brune's smile was more befitting to something large and predatory. His brown eyes looked similarly ravenous and, yes, he licked his lips. Ser Aldrik gave her a nod and she took a step forwards. She knew men like Brune. It was important to leave a certain first impression. To show him that she was not afraid.

“Lord Brune, my name is Maya Iresons, Ambassador of...”, she started but was cut off when he took a step forward, uncomfortably close to her. “Runestone”, he finished her sentence.

“Maya Iresons, Ambassador of Runestone. I don't need to see that cloak to see what you are” His voice was hoarse and he reeked of sweat. With a small grin he put a small sheet of paper out of a small pocket on his belt and moved even closer, until he almost whispered in Mayas ear

“A letter. From the venerable Lord Orson Royce of Runestone. In his kindest words, he asks me to give you the hospitality you deserve and to give you an escort of ten men until you leave Crackclaw Point”, he whispered, but suddenly he started to get louder. “He asked me! Me! As if I was one of his playing pieces!” he shouted and his voice smarted in her ears.

She resisted the urge to step back and didn't even flinch as he grabbed her right shoulder.

“He sounded as if we were old friends. As if he wasn't the one who gave me no other option but to sell my daughter to Crabb!”, he growled. “I wanted to wed her to this Tollett boy, but he...” Brune interrupted himself, breathing heavily and looking at Maya with furious anger.

“And now he kindly asks of me to give you the hospitality you deserve...”

Maya finally gave in to the urge and attempted to step back, but Brune was quicker. He grabbed both of her shoulders and looked her directly into the face. “Tell me, why are you here, bitch? What does the Bronze Lord want from you that you travel here, to my lands?”, he hissed.

What should she say now? She couldn't just speak about this to Brune. He was a Riverlord. He would probably tell it to his king. Or he would use this knowledge for himself. Maybe he would even sell it to the Storm King. What should she...

Without warning Lord Brune grabbed her and pulled her closer. “You don't want to talk, do you?”, he whispered. “You're quite pretty... I'm sure we can work out a deal. You can keep

your secrets. If you behave, you can keep your friends. And you can keep your beauty. I will even oblige to Royce's wishes, especially after the Bronze Lord sent me such a pretty gift" The way he licked his lips made her shiver. No! Not like this! Brune let go of her right shoulder and touched her hip, exactly where her dagger has been before she gave it to Ser Aldrik. The mercenary knight used this moment to clear his throat. "Mylord Brune, you can't mean to...", he started to protest but was cut off by Brune. "Am I speaking to you, Wolf? Why don't you go, bring the rest of Royce's men some piss to drink?" His hand slipped down, grabbing her bum, just as Mayas free hand grabbed the dagger. She felt a sudden flash of rage, deep almost primal rage, at this man who would rape her if she didn't stop him and at Orson Royce, who provoked this with his letter. Oh yes, especially at Orson Royce. Brune hadn't noticed her second dagger. One small stab and it would be over. Yes, she had to stop him. But some part of her asked herself, if stabbing a lord would be the wisest option. And the other part asked herself if she even cared about this. She looked in his lecherous eyes as he squeezed her bum and in that moment she knew that she did not care.

**[Stab him]**

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### **Lucas**

Lunett clapped her hands in excitement. "This is it, isn't it?", she squealed in joy, looking down on the hulking giant of a city below her, illuminated by the setting sun. Lucas gave her a smile. "Looks like it, right?", he answered. In the past five days, Lunetts behaviour got increasingly more excited the closer they got to the city, increasingly more lively, gleaming with happiness.

Lucas on the other hand didn't share her excitement. He had never been to Oldtown himself and wasn't impressed. He had seen the Free Cities of Pentos, Volantis and Myr, and Oldtown couldn't compete with them. Sure, it was larger, even larger than Volantis. But it was way uglier. It lacked the lavish pomp of Pentos, the fine elegance of Myr and the venerable grandeur of Volantis. Instead it was crowded with three or four-story buildings, crammed with people. From the hill the three were standing on, only a handful of buildings stood out from the rest and managed to impress him. One of them was the Hightower, easily the tallest building Lucas had ever seen. It was a gloomy day and the top of the tower reached the clouds. Not far away from it was the Starry Sept, seat of the Faith, with black marble walls and arched windows. And behind it, the Citadel could be seen, a complex of towers and buildings, connected by huge stone bridges, themselves full of houses for the Maesters. Dairon was somewhere down there, maybe wandering the streets of the city, maybe sitting in a chamber in the citadel. Or perhaps he lay in the gutters, robbed, his throat cut from ear to ear. Oldtown was a dangerous city. Leonard had been there a few times already and had little good to say about it. According to him, it was a city full of thieves, killers and whores, a city that corrupted good and honest men, if it didn't kill them first. Needless to say, Lucas wasn't looking forward for this. He was a knight and not even in his lowest days had he resolved to dishonourable behaviour. Even though the Gutters were no honourable people, he was able to do good things while working with them. And now he might be forced to resolve to dishonourable acts to find Dairon. He had no problem in working with thieves, killers and whores. Some people deserved second chances. But he had principles he wasn't willing to abandon for this search, no matter what.

He looked at Lunett, who was smiling at the city below her and asked himself, not for the first time in the past weeks, if bringing her here has been the wisest decision. At least Leonard was here. Surprisingly, the knight had made no advances on Lunett, even though she seemed to fancy him. Instead, he was watching over her, protecting almost like a brother would. And Lucas noticed that right now, Leonard was worried as he saw Lunett's exuberant joy. But as long as Leonard was at her side, Lucas had no doubt that Lunett would be safe. It took them another hour to get into the city. A long line of peasants tried to enter the city, even at this late hour and the city guard apparently took their work serious. This was probably one of the things Lucas had conflicted feelings for. On the one hand, he was looking forward to see the city guard working. They must have tremendous experience, serving in a city as huge as this. Raylansfair's city guard had three dozen members. Lucas knew them and while they were good people, Raylansfair was a very safe town. There were no high standards required to join the city guard. A few of them, among them the commander, were very competent, but Lucas knew that most of them would flinch when facing real danger. But he had also encountered the city guard of Volantis, who only served the powerful, he had encountered the city guard of Pentos, who was little more than a private army for the magisters, he had encountered the overzealous city guard of Qohor, consisting entirely of religious lunatics. And he had encountered the city guard of Tyrosh, consisting mostly of corrupt thugs who served anyone who gave them the money. From his experience, large cities tended to have corrupt watchmen and even corrupter people in charge. He had little doubt that Oldtown was similar. But he was willing to give the guards here a chance.

A small and slightly bored looking man, armed with a breastplate and helmet with the sigil of Oldtown greeted them with a nod. "Name and Reason?", he asked. Lucas gave him his most polite smile. "My name is Ser Lucas Flowers, my companions are Ser Leonard Constantine and Lunett Kawl, niece of...", he started, before looking at Lunett for help. He had never asked her the name of her uncle. From what she told, he wasn't very high-ranking, but connected and able to help finding Dairon. Lunett put on her most charming smile and looked at the guard. "My uncle is Thomas Kawl. He is a member of the city guard", she explained. The man gave her a nod. "Never heard of him, but then again, there are three thousand men working in the city watch. You should go to the Hightower if you look for someone particular", he explained, before giving them a wink to enter the city. Lunett made a little excited jump and the guard rolled his eyes, before grabbing Lucas arm. "Take good care of that girl. She seems to be excited to be here", he said. Lucas gave him a nod. "She is", he answered, watching as Lunett and Leonard entered the city.

The guard shook his head. "She shouldn't. There's a war going on", he answered ominously. Lucas raised his eyebrows. A war in Oldtown? He had heard of such things, street gangs flocking together, fighting over territory and power. It was common in some of the poorer districts in all of the free cities, except in Qohor where the citizens were too afraid of the city guard to try anything like that. Usually it was a sign that the city was in a bad situation.

"Two criminals, Butterfly and the Burned Man, fighting against each other. People are dying because of them every day. The Burned Man tries to appear like a philanthropist, who gives work to homeless children. However, this work includes spying, stealing, even killing for him. Butterfly styles himself as a vigilante, targeting criminals, but that does not mean much in a city that's full of criminals", the guard explained. Lucas sighed. "Sounds great...", he muttered, which made the guard chuckle. "Yeah, walk a mile in my shoes and say that

again", he grinned, before looking serious again. "When you go to the Hightower, don't take the girl with you. Mullendore might see her", he warned him. Lucas looked at him slightly confused. "Mullendore?"

"Ser Maron Mullendore. He is not the commander of the city guard, he is an independent, but with authority. Friend of the Lord Hightowers eldest son. And tasked with bringing these criminals down. He has a strong dislike for Butterfly, but currently concentrates on the Burned Man, who he deems the bigger threat. And he has a liking for young girls, but it wasn't me who told you that", the guard said. Lucas gulped but gave him a nod. Someone independent tasked with bringing these men down? Things must truly be dire then.

He caught up to Leonard and Lunett a few metres behind the gate. Lunett looked over to the Tower, visible from every point in Oldtown. "Gods... can we... can we go there? I've never seen something that tall...", she asked in amazement. Lucas gave her a smile, but Leonard shook his head. "No way Lun", he said. "First we need to talk to your uncle. Thomas, wasn't it?" Lunett's smile almost faded and Lucas noticed that she seemed to be uncertain what to say for a moment. She quickly regained her composure, but not before Leonard noticed it too.

"Lunett...", he said with emphasis. She gulped, giving Lucas and Leonard apologizing looks. "Well... about my uncle... it's a bit complicated. His name might not be Thomas and he might not be a guardsman. Or in Oldtown. Maybe I don't even have an uncle...", she stuttered. Leonard gave Lucas a furious glare and threw his hands in the air. "You tricked us!", he shouted and Lunett took a step back. "You fucking tricked us!"

Lucas saw the tears in her eyes as she backed off, looking at the furious Leonard. "I... I am sorry, I really am", she mumbled. "But I couldn't take it anymore at the inn. Every day the same routine. Serving some drunkards. Playing the harp. Cass teaching us lessons. Some more drunkards in the evening. I am young and I want to see the world. Oldtown and the Hightower. The Eyrie at night. The Free Cities. The Summer Isles. The Wall. I don't want to spend the rest of my lives at this inn. I'm sorry, I know I screwed up. I did a mistake and now you're hating me", she explained, tears running down her pretty face. Leonard shook his head in anger. Lucas knew, the knight hated being lied to. He himself wasn't fond of that either, but he could understand Lunett and was almost willing to console her. Still... taking her with them slowed them down. And she tricked them...

**[Act neutral]**

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## **Kersea**

Killing. There were days in which Kersea asked herself what killing even meant for her anymore. A slit throat, a knife in the guts... beating someone senseless and leaving him to be eaten by wolves. It was nothing personal. It never was. But it should.

She still remembered her first kill, a middle-aged Tyroshi with a blue beard. She still remembered every detail of his face. The fine wrinkles around the eyes, indicating a man who laughed a lot. The sharp nose, the golden teeth replacing several missing. The fear in his eyes as she stabbed him in the neck. She had cried for hours after it was done. Clayton consoled her, it was one of the few times he had ever been friendly to her. He had told her that the man deserved it, that he was a slaver and fond of very young girls. Her first kill...

There were days in which Kersea asked herself how far she had come that killing someone meant nothing to her anymore. Well, not nothing. But the regret was gone. It was easier. She

never wanted to become like Clayton, who felt nothing when killing someone. She forced herself to remember their faces and names, not only the ones she had killed, but also the ones her group had killed. Clayton simply forgot most of them as soon as his blade left their body, so she figured someone must remember these people. She forced herself to feel regret, unless Alysanne who felt pleasure while killing someone. She forced herself to do this, because she knew, once she stopped that, she would start to become less like herself. And more like Wolfius.

Wolfius... yes, he was a true beast. He lived to stab, to slice, to thrust. He was no part of their group, only assigned from their employer to keep an eye on them. The employer... he was only a name for her, a name almost terribly misleading in it's innocence. But she had never met the man. Of course not, Clayton would never trust her with this. After all these years, after saving his life just as often as he saved hers, he still didn't truly trust her. And she didn't trust him. Clayton Teryl was no man anyone should trust. There were days in which Kersea asked herself if she hated him. She knew it didn't matter. It did not matter what she wanted... a small house, deep in the woods, a warm fire, peace, her little sister singing her a song. When she remembered this, she knew why she did all of this. For her sister. For Briar. For her, she would even give up what little remained of her, the regret, the faces and names.

As she left the small room she had all for herself, she saw Clayton standing on one of the large windows. It would be easy to shove him down. She was good at sneaking up on someone. It wasn't the first time she thought about just killing him. But then she thought of her sister and what their employer would do to her. It would be the last mission, Clayton had promised it. After this, Briar would be free. Kersea was no fool. Clayton kept his promises, but he never promised to leave her alive. Only her sister. But that was good enough for Kersea.

She cleared her throat and Clayton turned around. He wasn't a very handsome man, but had a certain allure, with his muscular build and long brown hair, she had to admit it. There was a deep scar over his left eye, leaving it milky and blind, a permanent memory of the one time he failed to kill someone. Whenever he saw her, he forced himself to smile at her. She could tell it wasn't sincere. Sometimes she even doubted that a man as cold as him was able to smile sincerely. Right now he was wearing the clothes of a Braavosi, to complete his current identity, the identity of a man he had killed over a years ago. Things had been easier then. There had been more of them. Clayton. Alysanne. Kersea. Raenna... but Raenna was dead, or at the very least clever enough to appear dead. Now it was only her, alone with Clayton, Alysanne and Wolfius.

"Good morning, Kersea", Clayton said in a polite tone. "I hope you slept well" She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "Do you? As always, you're awfully civil for the man who holds my sister hostage", she answered. It was their little game. She would say something rude. Clayton would never answer impolite. Mocking, yes. But he would hide it behind polite words and allusions. He even gave her a short laugh. "Your tongue is as as sharp as always, my dear", he said. "Let's hope your blade is even sharper. I expect a raven from Oldtown any minute. Butterfly is sending us new instructions and I doubt he will be happy over that castellan's actions last week", he explained. Kersea understood what he hadn't told her. Butterfly was not happy. And Briar was in his dungeons. The last time she has been allowed to see her, a few months ago, her sister seemed to be happy. Unharmd. She was allowed

to keep the little music box Kersea had brought her from Myr and was listening to it. Sweet little Briar...

"How many, Clayton?", she asked. The man shrugged. "How should I know? As many as Butterfly wants us to kill. The castellan. The servants. The guards. If he wants to, you're going to kill the whole damn village and you know that", he answered. She gulped. Clayton was a true assassin, someone who killed for a living. It meant nothing to him. If Butterfly ordered him to slaughter a whole village, Clayton would ask how much time he had. She gave him a nod. "I know", she whispered, before turning her head away from him, looking down the stairs that led to the storehouse's ground-floor. She might as well leave Clayton to his thoughts. After all, he wasn't exactly the company she wanted to enjoy now.

It didn't get much better downstairs. Alysanne was sitting on a small chair, gently sharpening her long knife. Her face was quite pretty, with her black hair, similarly to Kersea's own and her piercing green eyes. The only thing that tarnished her beauty was the scar on her cheek and the carefully hidden scar on her neck. Of course, there were also the burn scars covering her left arm, shoulder and part of her belly. They all had their scars. Clayton wore them on his body, Kersea wore her's in her mind. And Alysanne had a scarred body as well as a scarred mind. Raenna had no scars, as Kersea remembered. Or maybe she had just been able to hide them better than the rest.

Alysanne's smile seemed to be a bit more honest than Clayton's and there were times where Kersea almost thought that Alysanne would enjoy her company. "Good morning, puppy", she smiled, putting her knife away. "You already talked to Clayton?"

Kersea gave her a weak nod. "New orders coming today", she mumbled weakly. Alysanne had nothing to do with the abduction of her sister. Still, she was part of the group. Before that fateful night in Blackwater Bay, Raenna had been the only one from her group she would even deem as a friend. Alysanne might be able to appear friendly, perhaps even charming. But behind this, she was just a scarred and ice-cold killer. Just like Kersea herself, in what she deemed her lowest moments. The moments in which she killed. The last one had been five days ago. She didn't know him. Wolfius called him 'Harking'. Another name on her list. Another one she mustn't forget.

She looked to the large, open door of the warehouse, as she saw someone entering.

Alysanne was quick to grab her knife, but quickly calmed down as she recognized Wolfius. He gave them both a short nod. "Morning", he mumbled, before sitting down on a small chair, as far away from them as possible. Wolfius was no man she wanted to talk with, but luckily he wasn't too eager to socialize either. Alysanne and he got along a bit better and at least on the surface, they were similar. But Kersea knew, Alysanne had something in her that deserved pity, something broken and scarred. Wolfius had no scars inside of him. He was a beast.

With a morbid fascination, Kersea noticed that Wolfius took something out of his overcoat's largest pocket. Something living, a small mouse. Kersea wanted to look away in disgust. She knew what men like Wolfius would do to animals, after all they were capable to do to humans. But to her surprise, Wolfius simply held the tiny animal in his hands, gently stroking it, even smiling a smile that was reasonably gentle. The mouse was sitting in his hands, apparently having nor fearing this beast. Kersea looked over to Alysanne, who quickly met her gaze and smiled. "See? He's not that bad", Alysanne whispered. Kersea shook her head. Wolfius kindness to this animal surprised her, but that was not enough to give her a better opinion of him. She had seen what he did to his victims and she knew why he killed people.



Clayton did it for money. Alysanne too, but she charged even more. Kersea killed because she had no other options, or at the very least she wanted to think so. But Wolfius killed for fun. He wasn't part of Butterflies group, as far as she knew, but he was friends with the man and occasionally helped him out, with quick, merciless brutality and sadistic pleasure. One redeeming trait meant nothing.

"You never told me what happened to the rabbit", Alysanne said suddenly. Kersea looked up. "What?", she asked. Alysanne's laugh was bright as a morning breeze. "The rabbit. I shot him in the leg, you bashed his head in, remember?", she explained. As Kersea still gave her a puzzled look, Alysanne sighed. "You're no fun, you know that? Harking, the guy you killed last week. You never told me how you did it. Was it painful? Was he a screamer, or a whiner, or one of this fucking brave guys? Was he even awake when you did it?", she asked with disturbing enthusiasm. There it was... Alysanne's sickest trait, the one thing that always reminded Kersea of the thing she would become as soon as she stopped caring. Her morbid fascination with killing, the pleasure she took from the tales. Yes... Harking. Another name on her list, wasn't he? To be honest, Kersea never killed him. At least not directly. Sure, Clayton wanted her to do it and let the wolves finish it. She never did. She left him there, she even killed that wolf who tried to maul him. Because she wasn't like Clayton. She cared. Maybe he was alive, maybe he was dead. Dead was more likely. But Alysanne wouldn't like 'maybe'. She looked up and saw Wolfius grinning in her direction. He was still petting the mouse, but his smile was directed at her now and nowhere nearly as pleasant as before. "You're talking about Harking?", he asked. "I'd like to hear that too... Tell me, how did he die?" And in that moment, Kersea realized one thing, one thing that filled her with horror. The look in his eyes... No, it wasn't possible! How could he...

*He knew!*

"Well Kersea, I'm desperately awaiting your answer. I want to hear every dirty detail", Alysanne giggled.

**[Tell Alysanne the truth]**

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### **Richard**

He opened his eyes... The bright daylight caused him pain, so he closed them immediately. A sudden pain flashed through his left leg and he let out a weak, husky groan, followed by coughs. His throat... It burned like fire... so dry, when was the last time he drank something? He opened his eyes again... The bright daylight was gone and he could see where he was. He lay under something... he saw stones... he lay on a ragged, old fur, surrounded by... stuff? There was no other word to describe the junk around him. A second fur, in similar condition lay on the ground, surrounded by empty, or half-empty bottles. Overall, it looked like someone lived here... as Richard Harking noticed the small river running next to him, he knew where he was, even before he saw the tall man, unbowed by his many years, his long grey hair and beard falling down almost to his waist. He was lying under a bridge, not any bridge, but the bridge that spanned a small stream, roughly a mile from his farm. And this man...

"Harking! You're back from the dead!", he shouted with a very throaty voice, hinting at the many continuous years he was a heavy drinker now. Richard managed to give him a weak nod as the man came closer. "You're going to need something to drink!", the man said, grabbing one of the bottles. It was filled with alcohol. It has to be filled with alcohol!

"Jarow...", Richard managed to mumble. The man stopped and looked at him, with slight annoyance. "It's still 'Lord Jarow' for you, peasant", he explained, but he seemed to be more benign than usual while saying it. Richard was lucky to encounter him while he was drunken. Jarow lived under that bridge for at least fifteen years now, keeping it clean and the surrounding area safe. He has been a soldier, from what Richard knew, until one fateful Ironborn attack years ago. Jarow held this bridge for days, until help from the keep came. He survived, almost unwounded, having killed at least a dozen Ironborn over this time, forcing the rest to search for an alternative path to the city. But after this, he had never been the same. Lord Raylan allowed that Jarow styled himself 'Lord of the Bridges', calling it the least this man would deserve after keeping the city safe. Once a year, Jarow was invited to dine with Lord Raylan in the castle and from what Jenna had told him, he was treated like a real lord, despite the fact that he was nothing more than a broken, shabby drunkard. But he was a drunkard with a very sharp sword, so Richard decided to play his game.

"Lord Jarow...", he mumbled, which seemed to please the older man, who finally gave him something to drink. Richard didn't even care what it was, he took a deep sip... before turning around, coughing helplessly, spitting whatever he just drank down on the ground, accompanied by Jarow's laughter. "Harking, you wimp! That was a damn fine drink, you should have cherished it", he shouted. Richard was breathing heavily, his throat hurting like hell, tears flowing down his face. But he was awake. Fully awake. His leg... He looked down to see a surprisingly clean bandage wrapped around it. And then he remembered... the warehouse at the docks... Wolfius... the young woman who knocked him out...

"Have you saved me?", he asked. Jarow shook his head. "Found you like this. What's the last thing you remembered?", he wanted to know. Richard closed his eyes... his head hurt like hell and he didn't want to know how he looked like right now. "There was this woman... a bit shorter than me, tanned skin, long dark hair... she wanted to kill me... it was at the harbour...", he mumbled. Jarow patted him on the back. "Alright, peasant. Take your time. You had a rough week and there have been times in which I wasn't sure if you would survive this. But you got one thing wrong. That girl has never tried to kill you, I've seen her, you know. From what I know, she saved your life", he explained, which was enough to make Richard jump up. The second he stepped up, he felt a sharp pain in his leg, not enough for him to fall down, but enough to stagger. Jarow grabbed his arm. "Easy, Harking. I removed that bolt and cleaned your wound, but you're still lucky that you can walk at all. That damned thing missed the bone and since you can move it it also missed the nerves. But you should refrain from running or jumping, understood?", he said. Richard managed a weak nod and Jarow patted him on the back. "Of course, if the Citadel would finally give in to my request for my own Maester, you would have been fit days ago. My techniques aren't that advanced. But you're alive"

Richard managed to give this helplessly crazy old man a thankful smile, even though his head was about to kill him. Finally he remembered something... there was something Wolfius had said to him... Jenna! He was going to target Jenna!

"Jarow, how many days have passed?", he asked and felt a feeling of dread running down his spine. Jarow evaded his gaze. "Nearly six thousand...", he mumbled. Richard stumbled back, breathing heavily. "No games, Jarow! How many days have passed since you found me?", he demanded to know. Jarow met his gaze again. "Oh, you mean that... I was talking about something else... it's been five days, Harking. You've been awake two times, but I doubt you remember that...", he explained, apparently not noticing that Richard felt close to

breaking down. Five days! Wolfius already had five days to kill his daughter! He had to go, he had to warn her, had to defend her, had to kill the beast! "Jarow, I have to go. My daughter is in danger", Richard said, his voice shivering, the pain in his leg being almost unbearable. Instead of mumbling something, Jarow gave him a surprisingly keen nod. "I see, Harking. I see that look in your eyes. A man has to do what he has to do. When you're done with this, come back here and we shall talk about repaying your debt", he said, sounding sane and sober like never before. He even gave him a salute, like an old soldier greeting a comrade. Richard wanted to salute back, until he noticed Jarow's stare. He wasn't looking at him, he was looking through him, saluting someone only he was able to see.

Richard managed to walk. Yes, he was limping heavily. But he was able to use the leg and he was alive, thanks to Jarow. And thanks to the woman who beat him senseless, as strange as it sounded... He walked up to the bridge, leaving Jarow alone in his own filth. He would repay the man, he owed him. But first he had to help Jenna! Richard looked to his left, down the path that lead to Raylansfair. He looked to the right, to the path that lead to his farm. And while every ounce in him screamed to run to the castle, he stopped himself. No... he was wounded. He was alone. He was unarmed. At least, he was able to change the last part! He had a sword, a fine weapon. It belonged to his father, the war hero. And while he had never used it, it would give him an advantage over Wolfius. He had no other choice, it had to give him an advantage! With grim determination, Richard Harking started to walk down the path to his farm. He had spent the last five days barely conscious under a bridge. He had been beaten up, he had been shot in the leg, he had been mocked by a monster! God's have mercy, he was not a violent man. But he had no patience left. Wolfius might be a monster, but Richard was a father! Should the beast try to hurt his daughter in any way, he would kill him!

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Despite his limping, Richard arrived at his farm a mere hour later. Next to his barn, surrounded by his fields, was a simple two-story building, far too big for him alone, built in happier times, for a family that was no longer here. Built for his wife, Elma. For Arvin, Dylar and Dramin. For Jenna. He had lost Elma. For all he knew he had lost Arvin, Dylar and Dramin. But he would never loose Jenna. Never!

As Richard approached the farm, he noticed something that sent shivers down his spine. The door was open, not only a bit, but actually wide open. Somebody was there, some intruder! Maybe Wolfius... Whoever it was, he was not invited and likely not friendly. But he had to get in there, he already sacrificed a valuable hour to get that sword. He needed it. But he needed to be careful. A direct approach could be risky, but he was never good at sneaking up on something. Maybe it was worth a try... Richard's gaze fell down on the road. Another mile down there was Roman's farm. The man had never been his friend, they even had a long running dispute. But Roman was not a bad man. If Richard would approach him, wounded and looking for help, could he refuse him? Would he refuse him? Could Richard risk this?

**[Try to sneak up on the farm]**

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## **John**

John stared at the wall of his room, barely looking up as the door was opened. He knew it would be bad for her. But he had no idea it would be that bad. Why should it? There was no

need for that! They were both grown people. Sure, he was a bit older than her. But she was mature for her age. There was no need for behaving like that!

As he looked up, he saw Gunel standing in his door. The old woman had shunned him in the past days, much to his relief. She hadn't told him, but it was clear that she was mad at him after he declined Samantha's wish. And she was not the only one. Aylard was clearly mad. Cass stopped talking to him for hours. Even Behara looked disappointed. And Samantha had a hard time even accepting it. But she had complied. She wasn't someone who would go against a direct order, except in very dire situations. He had to deny her wish, because he needed her in Raylansfair. Chasing after Lucas was pointless. There was no money to be made from this and he certainly would not do it just to please Aylard. He wouldn't risk his best rider for something like that. Of course, during the past four days, she could have made it to Oldtown and back, but it was still too risky. Instead she stayed at the tavern, rarely speaking to him, drinking a bit too much, generally showing her cold side. Gutten knew, if Samantha had one weak point, it was family. But he also knew that he did the right thing. He had a far larger problem after all. The Gutters were supposed to be in Raylansfair a day ago. But there had been no message from his men, Jaro and I'lian. The two brothers had been supposed to meet them at the inn days ago. With a heavy heart, Gutten decided to leave without them...

He looked at Gunel, who gave him a cold look. "How is she?", he asked. "How do you think she is, John Gutten?", she answered. Her voice was cold and incisive and for once, Gutten could understand her. She cared for Cass, almost like a mother would do. And the young woman hadn't reacted well to the news that the Gutters would leave. "The girl is in the barn, crying her eyes out", Gunel explained. Gutten sighed. Why was she doing this? There has been a clear, nonverbal agreement between them. It was just fun. Casual. No feelings. Why was she reacting like this?

"Tell me, Gunel, what is her problem?", he asked. Yes, he knew the answer. But he wanted to hear it from her. Gunel she was a former whore, as unlikely as it seemed. She was probably an expert when it came to avoid any emotions. The old woman sighed. "You really are a dumb asshole, aren't you? She has basically been your whore for the past two weeks. And she is twenty-two years old! I doubt she ever had a longer affair, at least not with any traveller who visited the inn. Now you're leaving and the girl feels used, Gutten", she hissed. Gutten narrowed his eye as she insulted him, but let her continue. He was not in the mood to hit her.

"And what do you suggest, whore?", he asked with a cold voice. The mutual dislike between them almost made him sick. But he respected her life experience. She had dealt with this, more than he ever had to. He rarely stayed at the same place for more than a few weeks. He had never dealt with break-ups before. Except... except that one time. That one time that costed him dearly... He closed his eye.

"Talk to her, Gutten. You owe her that much. Explain it to her. Give her some closure. It won't make it any easier for her. But maybe she'll get over it faster", Gunel explained and Gutten gave her a nod. He knew, she was right. But breaking up like that was new for him. His past break-ups had been easier. Sometimes the girl would understand it. Gutten would leave, they both would continue with their respective lives. Sometimes the girl would not understand it. Gutten would leave, he would continue with his life. Sometimes the girl would try to kill him. Gutten would kill her first, leave and continue with his life. There was exactly one time where it went differently. And it costed him dearly. Cass was a sweet girl. Besides

her beauty, she was quick-witted and pleasant company, not only in the bedroom. For her sake, Gutten hoped that this break-up would go fine.

He stood up. "Fine. I will talk to her", he moaned and Gunel gave him a smile. "In two weeks, this is the first decent thing I hear you say, John Gutten", she said, before stepping aside, letting him out of his room. Gutten gave her a cold glare, but said nothing. With an uneasy feeling, he went down the stairs, into the taproom. Temari sat on a small table, together with Behara and Samantha. He was one of the few people who wasn't judging him for his decision. Sure, Temari's position on family was even more rigid than Samantha's in many ways. But unlike her, this only counted towards his own family. He looked much better already. Sure, his face was still bruised and it would likely take a while until he was looking somewhat decent again. But he was tough, probably one of the toughest persons Gutten ever had the honour of fighting with.

Samantha didn't even look at him, while Behara gave him at least a short smile. Gutten smiled back to her. Behara was as innocent as a seventeen year old girl in a mercenary company could be. She wasn't someone to hold a grudge. He looked to his right and saw Janae leaning against the bar. His maiden fair, his best and only friend had understood why he denied Samantha's request. Of course she had understood. She hadn't judged him, because she knew, she wasn't in a position to judge.

Temari stood up and Gutten noticed that he was wearing armour. "Are we ready to leave, John?", he asked. Gutten shook his head. "Not now. There's something I have to deal with first", he answered. Temari gave him a nod, showing that he understood. "And you should take off the armour. Do you expect to be ambushed?", Gutten smiled. Temari chuckled. "Not exactly, but Aylard gave me a few glares today", he answered, to which they both laughed. "In all seriousness, I want to be prepared. After all the time in Essos, I am a bit out of practice when it comes to armour. And after that fucker wiped the floor with me... Don't know, it feels like it's about time to get used to it again", Temari finally added, this time with a stern expression. Gutten could understand this. He wasn't a fan of heavy armour, especially around the arms. It made him slower. Temari was thinking similarly, but was always more open for new ideas. And always a bit more pragmatic. "I understand. Good man", Gutten complimented him, before continuing his way out of the tavern.

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He found Cass in the barn, as Gunel had said. At first he only heard her. A soft, quiet weeping. Following the noise, he climbed up a ladder and found her in the hayloft. She was clearly one of the prettiest girls he had seen in the Reach. John had always a thing for redheads, but she clearly stood out. Right now, tears were flowing down her reddened cheeks and for some reason it gave Gutten an uneasy feeling. "What do you want?", she hissed, quickly looking away. The ceiling of the barn was low and Gutten had to crawl over to her on his knees. He felt uncomfortable, even nervous. Cass was a wonderful girl and he had to let her down as gently as possible. Unfortunately, John had little experience in letting someone down gently.

"Cass...", he mumbled. "I wanted to talk" He gave her a sorry look. When did this happen? He made it clear that no feelings should be involved. He never directly stated it, but never felt like he needed to. She was a tavern wench, she should know stuff like that! But she was also a former septa in training, he remembered. Wench or not, a septa needed a certain innocence. Maybe Cass retained more of that innocence than she wanted to admit herself.

"Talk... What is there to talk about, John?", she answered with a cold tone in her voice.

"Maybe you want to talk about how I warmed your bed for two weeks? How we danced. How we laughed. How you're just leaving me like this?"

Gutten closed his eye. Sure, she was hurt. And from her perspective, she surely had a good right to be hurt. But that wasn't how things worked, not in his world. He wasn't supposed to settle down with a girl he liked. He had responsibilities. He had to be there for his men. The Gutters had always been a very small group. Sure, they had served on battlefields, but never in large units like the Second Son's or, gods have mercy, the Golden Company. They were hired by private persons, merchants who needed bodyguards, but couldn't afford Unsullied, shady noblemen who needed hired killers, but couldn't afford a Faceless Man. Sure, they weren't as good as the Unsullied and a real Faceless Man would probably kill them all in seconds, but they were worth their money. And they were all that John Gutten had left. He looked at Cass. Maybe... No, that wasn't a possibility. She had a life here. And whatever she thought she would feel, it wouldn't last. It would never last.

"Cass, I know that is hard for you...", he started, noticing that his own voice was quite shaky, but she cut him off. "Do you? Do you know how hard that is, John Gutten? Have you ever spent time with someone, to the point you would do anything for them, only to lose it all in an instant?", she hissed. Gutten closed his eye. "I do", he answered. This silenced her for a moment and Gutten took the opportunity to speak. To confess. "Back on Orkmont, on the Iron Islands, I was madly in love with a girl. She was... beautiful. Hair like fire. A smile brighter than the sun on a hot summer day at sea", he explained and got a cold glare from Cass.

"My brother loved her too and... well, I was a different man then. I decided to fight him over her. At first we went into a brawl. Several brawls actually. Then blades got involved", he continued and shivered for a short moment. "It got messy. I lost my eye, he lost part of his nose. She wanted to stop it, you know? At this point, me and my brother, we were in a fit of rage. We had no control over our actions anymore. One of us cut her down as she tried to separate us. I don't know who it was, but in that moment I thought it was my brother... his life ended that day, leaving me to bury two bodies. I left the Iron Islands the same day and never went back"

He looked Cass directly into her beautiful blue eyes. He saw sorrow. But also something else. Fear? Was she afraid of him? Or was she pitying him? Both would have been inappropriate. "Is that why you denied Samantha her request?", she asked. "Because you're afraid of family? Because you're a kinslayer?" Her voice gained sharpness with every word and Gutten had to look away. Yes, he had been called kinslayer before, by his mother. After that, he hadn't told anyone. Janae knew it, he had told her years ago. But she never brought it up. After all, kin meant nothing to her. And just like him, she had done things she wasn't too proud of. But the look in Cass' eyes... it told him everything he had to know. She was judging him. Of course... former septa. They were quick to judge...

"Kinslayer...", he mumbled, and Cass' accusing look faded. "Look, John, I am sorry. I am sorry for what happened to you. Is that why you run away from everything? You and your band of mercenaries, travelling the world, always on the run, always without a home?", she asked. Was she... Seven Hells, that girl was clever! She actually managed to give him deep thoughts...

"I have a home, Cass. Janae is my home. Temari is my home. Behara and Samantha. Lucas, even though he left the company. My old friend Trout in Volantis. The Gutters are my

home", he said. It was true. His men were everything for him. His home, but he refrained from using this word too much. He noticed the hurt look in Cass' eyes a bit too late. "I could be your home too...", she mumbled.

Gutten hugged her. He didn't really know why, it just felt right in that moment. She was weeping and shivering, while tears fell down her face and on Gutten's shoulder. "That is not a good idea, Cass", he said. She looked up. "Why? Why are you so afraid, John?", she asked. Afraid? He wasn't afraid! He wasn't... But it was not good for her. What she had was nothing more than a small crush on a man she only knew as a dashing mercenary. He told her his backstory. But he hadn't told her half of the things he had done. She only saw a man who did what he thought was right. She didn't know what he was capable of. He was not a man who should be around women like her too long. He was a bad influence and he knew it. On his bad days he was even proud of it. But today was one of his good days!

"It is not good for you. I am not a good man and you deserve a good man", he explained, but Cass shook her head. "Do you even hear what you're saying, John? Do you think I am a naive little girl, fresh from the sept, a girl who has no idea how that works? Spare me all this 'It's not you, it's me'-bullshit. I know you are not a good man, John. What you said a few days ago, when you declined Samantha her wish... a good man would have allowed it. A good man would have done it himself. But I don't want a good man", she hissed and every word hit Gutten where he never wanted to be hit.

"You think I did the wrong choice with Samantha?", he asked. She gave him a stern nod. "I do. And I judge you for it. Whatever reason you had... it crushed Aylard. He barely slept the past four days. It crushed Samantha. I haven't talked to her too much, but she had her reasons for suggesting it. And now you want to crush me as well. Just leave me behind, as if it meant nothing", she explained.

Gutten wanted to tell her many things. That it meant nothing. That it didn't mean nothing. That his reasons were good. That his reasons were selfish. That he wanted her to come with him. That she should stay as far away from him as possible. But before he could even open his mouth, something else caught his attention. Male laughter. There were no other guests at the Hammered Harp and the only other males were Temari and Aylard. Aylard never laughed, not like this. And Temari... Gutten knew Temari's laughter. That wasn't him. Cass heard it too and her face dropped. That wasn't a friendly laughter. Gutten had heard it many times. Everytime he laughed himself, for example. A Norvoshi he met in Pentos had the same laugh, while he tried to rape Behara. A Qohorik, the craziest man Gutten ever met, had a laughter like this as he burned innocent people alive. Cass crawled to the wall of the barn, looking out of a small hole in the wall.

"I'm seeing three men. They are armed with swords. Two of them wear chainmail", she explained and looked back through the hole. "And... Fuck... Fuck", she muttered, before turning around, pale and trembling with fear. "They have Kyyette. They must have captured her just now. She was returning from Sparrowsfield, she was buying supplies", she whispered.

Gutten crawled past her, looking down. He saw Kyyette, sitting on her cart. She was bleeding, likely because one of the men had hit her in the face. But she was otherwise unscathed. One of the men had his sword drawn and was laughing, quite loudly. The other two were nearing the barn. Fuck! Gutten knew men like them. Bandits. Common fuckers, but just as deadly as a Faceless Man when they get the chance. From their laughter, Gutten could tell that they were animals. And he could see something even worse. At least half a dozen men were

entering the tavern. His people were there, his family! In the woods, Gutten saw more movements, nearing the tavern.

"John! My god, John we have to do something! They are going to kill her, we can't let her die, please John, do something!", Cass whispered in terror. Gutten looked down, looked at these animals who tried to pose as humans, looked at the woman they just took hostage. No...

They would not get away with that, he would not allow it! They were all going to die!

"Hey, I saw someone up there", one of the men nearing the barn exclaimed. "Whoever this is, you should come down. The Band of Claws won't hurt you", he exclaimed, not even hiding the fact that he was lying through his teeth. "You think it's a bitch?", the other man said, to which they both started to laugh. "I hope so. I'm going to have her first, then you and then we'll give her to Bear. Hey, girl. Come down and my cock will be gentle", the first one laughed.

Gutten narrowed his eyes, looking at Cass. "You stay down. Whatever happens, don't leave this barn until I tell you to do", he ordered. Cass gave him a short nod. Clever girl. As silent as possible, Gutten crawled to the edge of the hayloft, slowly standing up as much as possible. He had done this before, in a barn near Lorath. He was unarmed. His opponents on the other hand... Well, he had to change this!

The two men entered the barn, giggling, with swords in their sheets. Bloody idiots! "Come on, girly. You don't need to be afraid", the second man said. They both went to the ladder, finally looking up to the hayloft. "What the...", the first man said. These were his last words. Gutten jumped down before any of the men even thought of drawing his sword and quickly landed on top of them, dragging them both down. He delivered a fierce punch to the first man's head and an even stronger blow to the second man's throat. The hit was not enough to crush the man's throat, but enough to stun him. Long enough for Gutten to grab the second man's sword, quickly stabbing him on the ground. He turned to the first man, who held his head in pain. "You stupid... one-eyed cunt... you have no idea what you've just done. Bear will kill you, he will...", the first man said, but Gutten cut him off by driving the sword through his throat. "Bear can go fuck himself", he muttered, looking up to Cass. "Are you alright?", he asked. She gave him a short, frightened nod.

Gutten looked out of the barn, looking at the third man, who just stood there, frozen in shock. At least he had his sword drawn.

"Don't come any closer!", the man shouted.

Gutten came closer.

"I'm warning you!"

Gutten ignored the warning.

The man made the mistake to attack first. He delivered a quick strike to his head, Gutten parrying it effortlessly. His counter-attack was parried, but strong enough to bring the man to his knees. A second strike to the head ended the man's life.

A sudden movement caught his attention. The fucking blind spot. It was always the fucking blind spot to his right! Gutten lurched around, trying to parry the strike, knowing it was too late... Fuck! His opponent made a quick strike, but suddenly stopped, in the middle of a movement that would have otherwise killed him. Gutten noticed someone standing behind the man, having just stabbed him in the back. Cass! She followed him. Good girl...

She looked at him, almost smiling. "Thought you could need some help, John", she said, breathing heavily. Gutten smiled back, before he looked at Kyyette. The woman stood up, her eyes burning with anger. "Fucking assholes!", she shouted, looking at the dead men. "Those



motherfucking assholes! Listen, Gutten, there are more of them in the inn. Almost a dozen. You got to do something about this, you're men are in danger as well!" Her voice was sharp, but she was clearly afraid.

Gutten looked to the inn. Yes, she was right. He had to do something... but a dozen men! He wasn't able to fight against a dozen men! Maybe it was better to be stealthy... but every second he would not fight in there was a second in which his friends could die... and his home would be shattered once again.

**[Try to be stealthy]**

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## **Ellena**

With a very uneasy feeling, Ellena watched Jaron walking down the harbour. That was not right. He did nothing wrong, didn't he? Of course, she had asked him why these men attacked him and he had told her that he had no idea. Common street thugs. Ellena knew, people like these live in every larger city. Braavos, pretty as it was, was no exception. But in Braavos, even most of the thugs followed a certain code of honour, rarely challenging anyone without a sword, rarely attacking while outnumbering their enemy. The men who attacked Jaron had been different. Terroma had saved him, had saved her and now the captain intended to give him to the city guard. That was not right...

With shaky hands, Ellena knocked on Terroma's door. A few moments passed and she feared that her friend wasn't in his room, that he might be in the city, unaware of the danger that would await him on the ship. But then, she heard a lock turning and the door was opened. She looked into Terroma's kind face, while his mouth formed a smile. "Ellena. Can I help you?", he asked. Ellena looked to her right, where the captain's quarters were located. The captain was still talking to Talea, she heard their muffled voices, but couldn't understand any words. "Can I come in?", she asked. Terroma gave her a nod and stepped aside, letting her enter his room.

Terroma's room was almost terryfingly impersonal. A bed, a table with a chair, a simple chest. No personal belongings. Terroma closed the door behind her and made a handwave, offering her the chair. Ellena didn't react to the offer, instead she looked at him and sighed. In the few months she spent at the horrible orphanage, she had dreamt of a friend like Terroma. A kind man, a protector, one who wouldn't hesitate to throw himself in danger for her. But a friendship like this had to work both ways. And now it was her turn to protect Terroma.

"I've talked to the captain", she said and noticed that Terroma's face dropped. He suspected it already... "The harbourmaster of Oldtown was here. He informed the captain that the city guard investigates the... incident. The captain wants to give you and Jaron to them for interrogation", she managed to say. Still, Terroma looked calm, relaxed, as if all of this meant nothing to him. "Then they shall interrogate me. I have nothing to hide", he explained and Ellena froze in shock. Why was he so calm? The city guard could do whatever they wanted to him. Beat him senseless. Torture him for fun. Hang him for murder...

"Terroma, I have a bad feeling about this. You have to run", she urged him. Terroma gave her a bright smile, his rotten teeth contrasting his pale skin. "Ellena, why exactly are you so worried? The city guard has no evidence against me. I only defended myself", he tried to calm her down. But Ellena was still worried. She knew a bit about things like that. In the end,

someone powerful would rather execute Terrorma than even attempting to solve the case. She wouldn't risk that.

"Please, Terrorma... the harbourmaster said that they just want to talk to you, but I don't believe him. He said that a man named Mullendore investigates this case. What happens if he is a bad man?", she begged and noticed a subtle shift in Terrorma's face.

"Mullendore?", he asked. "Maron Mullendore?" His tone changed, his stance, his gaze. Terrorma looked seriously worried. Ellena gave him a nod, to which Terrorma uttered a short curse. "Fuck... This is not good", he said, while walking to his chest.

"I don't know the Burned Man. I don't know Butterfly or any other crimelord in this city. But I know that Maron Mullendore is the worst of them all, because technically he is not a criminal", Terrorma explained. "I have never met him, but heard of him. A knight, yes, but less knightly than a Dothraki horselord, they say. The stories I have heard of him make me shiver and, sweet Ellena, there is one thing you can believe me: I don't shiver easily"

With these words, Terrorma took something out of the chest... his small knife... and turned around, his kind smile gone. "When Mullendore is in charge of this investigation, the Burned Man and Butterfly won't be around for long. He will get them. He will hang them. But for every associate of Butterfly or the Burned Man, he will hang two or three innocents. He is a man like that. When Mullendore is in charge of this investigation, I have to go", he said decisively.

Ellena looked at him with a lump in her throat, trying not to tear up. "Will you come back?", she asked. Terrorma nodded. "Always, dear Ellena. I will hide for a few days, maybe a few weeks. You will travel to Raylansfair and when you come back here, I'll meet up with you. And then we travel back home", he promised. Ellena couldn't help, she started to smile. She believed him, or at least wanted to believe him. Terrorma gently hugged her. "Until then, stay safe, Ellena", he whispered, before looking her sternly into the eyes. "The most important thing is, don't search for me. I am looking for a very dangerous man here in Oldtown" Ellena frowned as she heard this. "But what if I have to find you?", she asked. "What if we're in danger?"

Terrorma's smile faded. "I am not able to save people from danger, Ellena. All I ever do is bringing them deeper into it", he said sullenly, before taking a deep breath. "But if you have to find me, there is a butcher's shop in Ragpycker's Wynd. The butcher owes me a favour and I will stay with him", he explained, before giving her a last smile. "May the gods be with you. All of them", he said, before moving past her, out of the chamber and out of her life.

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As Ellena went out of the room, she heard loud voices from the upper deck. She recognized Moreo, he was talking to a man and seemed to be agitated. The voices came closer and Ellena backed away from them, closer towards the captain's room. The voices didn't sound friendly. She was used to it from Moreo, who had the foulest mouth on the ship, but was usually well-intentioned. But the other voice shouted and cursed, some of these curses were completely new to her. And then there was a third voice, calm, quiet, yet enough to interrupt both. Ellena heard footsteps coming down the stairs and was finally able to understand some of the things that were said.

"So, you're telling me that both men we're looking for just left the ship a few minutes ago?", the angry voice said.

"Yes, I do", Moreo answered. "They're gone and whoever sent you won't get them, you follow me?"

"We'll see", the second voice, the calmer voice, answered. It sounded like a man belittling a child.

Finally, she saw them. Moreo, his green beard unkempt, giving her a worried look. "Ellena? What are you doing here? Go back to your room, now!", he ordered her. Next to him walked an ugly man, with a pale and puffy face. He had a tired look in his eyes, but looked also quite angry. Ellena saw small red lines all over his face, like fading scars. He wore plated armour and a long coat made of black fur. And he looked at her with rage. "Oh no, girl, I don't think so", he hissed, walking forwards and grabbing Ellena at the shoulder, quite hard. "You're coming with us when we talk to the captain"

Ellena suppressed the urge to scream and kick, mainly because she knew that it wouldn't help her. The ugly man looked her into the eyes. "No tricks, girl. We'll talk to the captain and if he behaves, we won't hurt you", he said. Ellena looked over her shoulders to Moreo, who stared at the ugly man with anger, but did nothing. Behind him stood a plain man, a bit shorter than Moreo, with very dark hair and pale skin. He looked ordinary, but there was something in the way he moved that reminded Ellena of the Bravos at home, young swordsmen who roamed the streets of Braavos at night, in their random brutality even more dangerous than a Faceless Man. He looked back at her and Ellena couldn't stand his gaze. She was shivering in fear. If only Terroma would be here... he wouldn't allow anyone to hurt her. He would protect her. But she had sent him away...

The dangerous man walked past Moreo, towards the captain's door, opening it without knocking. His moves reminded her of a lion, ready to attack. She noticed that his right hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Before she was able to follow him, the ugly man dragged her with him, towards the captain's quarters. Moreo followed and Ellena saw that he was about to draw the small knife he was carrying with him. No... by the gods, no, she hoped Moreo wouldn't do anything stupid. He noticed her pleading stare and moved his hand away from the knife.

"Good evening, captain, mylady", the dangerous man said, with a cold voice. "My name is Samuel Harrington. The charming man in my company is Jaylon Gordus. We're here for a so-called knight, who styles himself 'Ser Jaron the Bastard'. You don't happen to know anything about it, do you?" His voice was full of mockery and disdain. The second the ugly man, Jaylon, entered the room, dragging her with him, Ellena saw Talea gasping in shock. "Ellena!", she exclaimed. "What is the meaning of this?"

Jaylon let out a sigh. "It means that you're in trouble. It took Butterfly days to find out who killed his men. Days he could have spent better. He is not happy", he explained, his voice being a strange mix of anger and surliness. Samuel, the dangerous man, nodded. "What my companion said is true. He sent us to fetch the bastard. Both bastards actually...", he hissed, taking a step towards the captain. Ellena noticed that Moreo had entered the room too, his hand now on the hilt of his knife again. "So, I'm asking you once. Where are the bastards?", Harrington added. His voice was remarkably calm, but sent shivers down Ellena's spine. She could tell the captain was afraid. He was unarmed. Talea was unarmed. Moreo had his small knife, but he was not Terroma, who would kill both men in an instant. And Ellena started to be afraid too. The ugly man, Jaylon, was armed with a longsword his grip around her shoulder was hard and painful. But the other man was worse. Harrington was calm, yet he reminded Ellena of a predator.

The captain walked closer and even though he was a bit taller than Harrington, the other man seemed to tower him. "You have five seconds to leave this room", the captain hissed,

but Ellena noticed that he seemed intimidated, he even had to put his hand on the table to his right to even stand without shivering. Considering her rapid heartbeat, she couldn't hold that against him. She felt something terrible looming.

Harrington looked at the captain. The captain met his gaze with furious anger.

*One*

Ellena looked over to Talea. She looked afraid, more than afraid, close to a panic

*Two*

She saw the fear in the captain's eyes.

*Three*

Behind her, Jaylon's hand began to tap on her shoulder, unintentionally, as if the man was nervous himself.

*Four*

The captain gave Harrington a helpless smile, full of fear.

*Five*

"I don't think so, captain", Harrington finally said.

The captain closed his eyes, gulping, while Ellena held her breath. In the same moment, Harrington pulled out his dagger and drove the edge right through the captain's hand, deep into the wooden table, all in a single, elegant and deadly movement. The captain went to his knees, his arm effectively nailed to the table, letting out a short scream of agony. Ellena saw Moreo approaching, his knife drawn. In a movement not less elegant, not less deadly, Harrington ripped his dagger out of the captain's hand and right through Moreo's throat, before the Tyroshi was even able to attempt a strike. Moreo let out a helpless gurgle, his knife falling on the floor, as he put his hands on the hole in his throat. Harrington looked over his shoulder, his cold stare met Ellena's shocked tear-dimmed eyes. Then he pulled the dagger out of Moreo's throat and the Tyroshi went to his knees, gurgling, struggling, dying. "I'm repeating my question", Harrington hissed. "Where is the bastard who killed Butterfly's men? Where is the bastard knight that was supposed to die on this day?" He looked at Talea, who staggered back, tears flowing down her face. The captain was lying on the ground, clutching his bleeding hand. And Ellena herself shivered in fear. If only Terroma would be here...

"They are not going to tell us anything", Jaylon said. "We should take the girls back to Butterfly. Give the captain a few days to think about it, while gradually sending them back to him" Ellena froze in shock as she thought about what he just implied. No... No... No!

The captain got up on his feet again, his hand still bleeding heavily. He was pale, frightened and looked like a man twice his age. "The man you're looking for is named Terroma", he mumbled weakly. Talea looked at him in shock, trembling with fear. "Father, no...", she whispered. The captain gave her a fond look and a helpless smile, before looking back at Harrington. "Third cabin to the left. Ser Jaron's cabin is the fourth on the right. Ser Jaron is likely sleeping and Terroma will be smart enough not to resist", he said. "Please, don't hurt my daughter"

Harrington shrugged. "That depends on the cooperation of the two bastards", he stated, before looking at Jaylon. "You're staying here. I'm checking the cabins out. If I am not back in five minutes, kill the little one. If I am not back in ten minutes, kill the captain's daughter. If I am not back in fifteen minutes, take the captain back to Butterfly", he ordered and Jaylon gave him a stern nod. "With pleasure", he said. Ellena's heart dropped as Harrington walked past her, not even bothering to look at her. He was going to check two empty cabins... and then what? What will they do to her? There has been only one time in which Ellena had been afraid like this. She shivered in fear, tears running down her face. She saw Jaylon giving her a cold look, his hands on the hilt of his sword. This was not how it was supposed to end... She heard the steps approaching the captain's door and turned around, as much as Jaylon's strong grip around her shoulders allowed it. Harrington entered the room, his face frozen in displeasure. He didn't look angry, but the cold fury in his eyes was enough to tell Ellena that she was in problems. The sort of problems in which she couldn't count on others to help her. There would be no Terroma, there would be no Jaron. Talea couldn't help her, the captain wouldn't help her.

"The chambers were empty", Harrington said and the captain's face dropped, just like the man himself dropped to his knees. "No... No, that is not possible. They have been there a few hours ago. I have checked on both of them. Please, don't hurt my daughter. Do what you want to me, but don't hurt...", he stuttered, but was cut off as Harrington kicked him in the face with a heavy leather boot. The captain fell to the ground, bleeding and not moving, while Talea let out a scream of terror, running to her father. Harrington did nothing to stop her. He only looked down on her as she was weeping over her unconscious father's body. He looked up as Jaylon cleared his throat.

"Well then... we can't bring him the bastards, we can at least bring him two girls. I'm sure he will have a lot of fun with the older one. And... well, the younger one is surely good for something. Give him a knife and she will entertain him for days", the ugly man said, his voice sounding completely bleak. Ellena had expected him to sound angry or gleeful. It wouldn't have been easier, but at least she would have known that she was dealing with a complete monster here. But despite his anger, Jaylon seemed to be someone who did this just because he was ordered too. For some reason, that made it even worse.

Harrington looked slightly irritated for a moment, looking down on Talea, then to Ellena. "Why should we do that?", he simply asked, obviously a bit confused. "We will wait if one of the girls has something important to tell us"

Jaylon shrugged. "Because, no matter what happens today, Butterfly will be displeased. Bringing him a girl could help raising his mood a bit", he explained in an annoyed voice, almost as if he was talking to a child. Ellena shivered as Harrington looked at her. No... Gods, please no...

Harrington looked back at Jaylon. "Pleasing Butterfly is not my job. That's what whores are made for. If one of the girls has something useful to say, that's it. I'm not bringing them to Butterfly without reason, just to give him a new plaything", he growled.

Jaylon's grip around her shoulders tightened. "Eh, fuck you Harrington. We don't wait if any of this bitches has something useful to say. We take them to Butterfly, he will make them talk. Maybe he'll use knives. Maybe he'll use axes. Maybe he'll use...", he began to shout, but was cut off by Harrington hitting him in the face with his closed fist. It was a strong blow, enough to make Jaylon stumble backwards. "Fuck!", the ugly man shouted. "You fucking broke my fucking nose!"

Harrington gave him an indifferent face. "That's what you get for questioning my authority", he simply stated. Jaylon mumbled something Ellena couldn't understand, but didn't even need to understand. She gulped. Maybe... maybe things were starting to look better again. Maybe Harrington wasn't that bad. Maybe he...

His fist hit her face without warning. The blow wasn't as hard as the one he gave to Jaylon, but enough to make her fall to the ground, making her face explode in unbearable pain. She barely heard Talea letting out a hysterical scream, barely saw Harrington kicking the captain's daughter in the face, barely clung to staying conscious. She would stay conscious. She had to stay conscious, even though she felt the warm blood running down her face. She had to think, had to concentrate, had to blend out the horrible pain.

*Don't get unconscious. Stay awake. Stay strong. Don't fall asleep. These men will kill you if you fall asleep, or worse. Ignore the pain. Stay strong. Carry on. Don't be afraid. Fear cuts deeper than swords.*

"Maybe now you see that I don't play any games!", Harrington exclaimed. His voice was louder now, finally trembling with anger. "I will bring these two fuckers back to Butterfly. You are not part of my job. But if you don't tell me what I want to know now, I will take you all back to the man. And I will be honest to you, it will be the most terrible experience you ever had in all your life"

Ellena felt her senses coming back, in one horrible flash of pain. She did not scream, but she couldn't help and started to cry and shiver. From what she could tell, her teeth weren't damaged. Her nose... it didn't seem to be broken. The blow wasn't that hard, yet the pain was worse than any physical pain Ellena had ever experienced. But she wouldn't give him the pleasure of drifting into unconsciousness. She wouldn't give him the pleasure of being helpless. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jaylon, who stood next to her. The man was giggling. "That was nice, Harrington", he chuckled. Harrington only gave him a cold glare. "So, girl? Do you have anything to say about this... Terroma?", she heard him saying. She could tell them where Terroma was, could tell them to stay safe... but could she live with herself after that?

And then she saw it. Moreo's knife, a valuable and exquisite thing, a silver blade, a golden hilt, a family heirloom, only an inch in front of her. She knew she was quick. She could grab it. Jaylon wouldn't expect it and he was all that stood between her and her freedom. A stab in the leg and she could run, she would be free...

**[Try to stab Jaylon and run]**

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**Jenna**

As she looked at Carma's gentle face, she noticed how tired she really was. During the past five days, her sleep has been restless. In her dreams, she saw Ser Ilhan die, again and again. Sometimes it was Harris who killed him. Sometimes it was herself who fatally stabbed him. Yes, she knew that she never held the knife, that she never stabbed him. But she also knew that he would have been still alive if only she would have been able to control her curiosity. And this knowledge was worse than anything else. Harris was the monster who killed Ilhan. But she gave him the opportunity to do so. Inside of this castle, she wouldn't be able to sleep safe and sound again until Harris was gone. Considering her luck, she wouldn't be surprised if he would outlive her. But Carma had a family! Could she really get her into danger? Her father would have refused this offer. Her father would have faced Harris. But her father wasn't here. And she wasn't as strong as he was. She wasn't even as strong as Ser Ilhan claimed she could be. She was weak and alone. And she needed a friend.

"Yes...", she said weakly, trying not to tear up. "Yes, please" She looked at Carma who gave her a bright smile. "I am finished for the day anyway. The lord allowed me to spent the nights with my family now that Yack is born. Just get your things and let us go", she said, approaching the door of Jenna's chambers. "I'll pack my things and meet you at the front gate in a few minutes", she added, before leaving. Jenna couldn't help herself, she had to smile. Maybe she was safe at Carma's house. Maybe things would finally look up for her. And still... there was this dark place of her mind, telling her that things would never look up for her. It was bad already and it could only get worse.

Jenna had to pack her things in a sudden rush, mixed with a very bad feeling about... well about everything. She had a bad feeling about staying in the castle. But if she would endanger Carma, she could never forgive herself. The Strads were probably the only family in Raylansfair who hadn't lost someone to the Ironborn or to disease. All three of Carma's and Urid's children survived their birth. And the youngest one was only a few months old! The baby had a great start into life and Jenna would not ruin this. She would only stay a night at Carma's house and maybe by sunrise she would travel to her father's farm. Maybe her father was there. Maybe he was only sick, unable to contact her. Maybe... But if not, Jenna Harking wouldn't endanger her friends, she wouldn't!

She didn't pack everything. It would take too long. She made sure to take everything of personal value with her. Things she just couldn't leave behind in this castle, not with Harris. It didn't took her that long and she was actually faster than Carma. Of course, she knew she had only this one free day. She had no intentions of coming back here tomorrow. Maybe one day, when Harris was gone. When Septon Corbin wrote his letter to the High Septon. When Harris would hang for murder. And when a new Lord would be in Raylansfair, a good and just lord. As she thought about it, it sounded too easy. Things were never easy for her.

Carma took her time. Just as Jenna was about to get worried, her friend came down the stairs the lead to the servant's quarters. She smiled and waved at Jenna. "I'm so glad you're coming with me Jenna!", Carma smiled. "It's going to be wonderful. You'll love the kids" Jenna managed to give her a happy smile. Insincere happiness yes, but still better than sadness. There was no need to worry Carma with her problems, after all she likely had problems of her own. Three children and from what Jenna knew, the Strads weren't exactly a rich family, but the fact that Carma had anything to spare proved to her that she was a true friend. Jenna felt horrible for accepting. And she knew, her father would be disappointed.

They moved down the small path to Raylansfair in silence. Carma had an easy way of walking and Jenna noticed once again that her friend had apparently no worries about

anything. That was refreshing, but also a bit unsettling. Jenna grew up being worried and timid. Her whole life had been one large worry. It was far beyond her how someone could actually just... live without all these fears. Of course, there were a few moments in which Jenna was happy. The moments with her father. The short moment of strength she felt after Ser Ilhan spoke to her. But it took a special person to be as carefree as Carma. She knew, she would never be like that. She thought too much about the problems ahead.

Carma's house was located in the outer parts of the village, not too far away from the castle itself, residing near the coast. Jenna got a lovely view on the lighthouse from there, next to it the large archive. She had never entered it, but knew that it was mainly built underground, it's tunnels reaching far below Raylansfair. She knew that not even a third of the stories about it were close to be true, much to her relief. Carma's house was small, fitting to a tailor and a servicewoman, a single-story building located directly on the main street that lead to Raylansfairs centre. Even before they reached the door, it was opened and a man stepped out, not very tall but quite muscular, with fair skin and dark brown hair. He quickly walked up to Carma, hugging her tightly and giving her a gentle kiss. "I'm glad you're back", Jenna heard him whisper, before the man looked at her. His face dropped. "You... You're Jenna Harking, right?", he asked. She had never met him before, but from what Carma and her father had told her she would have recognized Urid Strad immediately. Just as he obviously recognized her. She gave him a nod and he gave her a sad smile in return.

"This... this is probably not a good time to ask... but do you know anything about your father?", he asked. "Because... well, we haven't seen him for a while. Phillip is currently talking to the city guard about this. But, well, maybe you know anything about it" He took a short and insecure step towards her and she shook her head. "I don't know more than you do", she whispered. "Ser... Lord Harris promised me to look for him"

Carma gave Jenna a bright smile before looking at Urid. "And I'm sure they will find him. Anyway, you can see how shaken Jenna is. She will stay at our house for a while, at least for the night", she explained. Urid raised his brows. "At least? But what is with your work? This Lady Carma is talking about, she won't be too thrilled when you stay away from your work", he said. Lady Halla... Jenna hadn't thought about her reaction. Surely she would be angry. Oh yes, she would be very angry. Another good reason to stay away for a longer while. Maybe that wasn't all that bad.

Urid did not answer immediately, instead he gave Jenna a short hug first. "It's alright. Stay as long as you want. Your father is a good friend and I owe him to keep you safe as long as you want. Come in, you have to meet the kids", he said. Jenna gave him a heartfelt smile and followed him and Carma into the house.

The Strad's house was nothing special. Her father's farm was larger, but it was also built for more people. Jenna could clearly tell that this house was built with only two people in mind. It was simple, small, but also quite pretty. The perfection Carma showed during her work apparently also caused her to keep her own house clean. Next to the main room, a small room with a central table and a fireplace, Jenna counted three rooms. Out of one of these rooms, a young boy entered the room, excitedly running towards Carma. "Mother! Mother!", he shouted, jumping into her arms. "I missed you", he giggled, as Carma hugged him tightly. A girl, looking not older than the boy, followed him into the room, and while she seemed to be far less wild, she seemed not less enthusiastic about seeing her mother back. She walked up to Carma and got a big hug of her own. The boy gave Jenna a shy smile. "Mother, who is this?", he asked.



A blissful smile appeared on Carma's face as she answered. "Farrel, this is Jenna Harking, my friend from my work at the castle. Jenna, these are Farrel and Mickaela, my wonderful kids", she explained. Farrel gave her a wink. "Hello...", he said with a friendly, but certainly shy voice. Mickaela did not say anything at first, but also gave Jenna a friendly smile before walking up to her. "You work at the castle? Do they have dragons there? Mother always says no, but I don't believe her", she said with a curious expression on her face. "And what is your job? Are you a soldier? Or do you do the stuff mother does? You know, the boring stuff" Carma let out a loud laugh. "Mickaela!", she said with feigned sternness. "Jenna just arrived. You can ask her later. First I will show her where she can sleep. And then, I'll look after my baby" Urid gave his wife a loving smile. "Yack is asleep right now. You won't believe how exhausting he can be", he chuckled, to which Carma gave him a short glare. "Well, I was the one who gave birth to him, my love", she answered, before looking at Jenna. "Come on. We have a small bed in the storeroom. It's not much, but still... We made it for Urid's brother, but he hasn't visited us so far"

Carma entered one of the three rooms and Jenna followed her. The room was obviously a storeroom and surprisingly large. Jenna saw a small bed, indeed not much, but more than she even expected. She would have been content to sleep on the floor and felt a heartfelt wave of thankfulness. "Thank you Carma", she said. "For everything"

Her friend did not answer at first and only gave her a warm smile. Jenna sat down on the bed, Carma next to her and started to unpack her few belongings. Just to be sure that she hadn't left anything of value at the castle. There was her small purse... her hairbrush... the small knife her father gave her so that she was able to protect herself... her mother's... oh no! One particular thing was missing from the bundle. She left her mother's valuable wedding ring! She was certain that she had put it into the bundle, but it wasn't there. Maybe it fell out, there was no other explanation. She gave Carma an alarmed look.

"I have to go back to the castle!", she exclaimed. There was no way she would leave her mother's ring in there. Lady Halla would take it and sell it as a punishment for Jenna staying away from work, she knew it! Carma gave her an irritated look. "What? Jenna, don't be ridiculous. Why do you want to go back now?", she asked. Jenna gulped and had to look away. "My mother's wedding ring. I can't leave it there Carma, I won't", she explained. Other people would have laughed about her stupidity. Carma only gave her a bright smile. "Don't be ridiculous Jenna. You are shaken and you just arrived here. I will go for you. Let me just look after Yack for a moment, then I'll go back to the castle to get your ring. Not a problem for me and you are a guest after all. I insist", she smiled.

Jenna gave her a thankful, but also slightly worried look. Carma was too kind to her. Could she really burden her with the long walk? This would take some time and Carma only had a few hours with her family before going back to work. On the other hand, Jenna was tired. But she couldn't leave the ring in the castle!

**[Go yourself]**

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## **Kersea**

She closed her eyes. Wolfius knew. It was impossible, she had been careful. But still, the look in his eyes told her everything. He was harder to read than most people, but Kersea was quite talented when it came to reading them. Somehow, he had found out. Lying was pointless. She just hoped that Clayton wouldn't find out. Damn him. Damn her. Damn her soft heart. She spared the man in a fit of mercy. Her list was long enough already. She never

wanted to take another life. But now her sister would pay the price for it. Kersea knew, after all these years she still had too much of her old self left to be strong enough, to do what had to be done and she hated herself for it. It was still too hard for her to kill, after all these years in which she had been barely more than Clayton's dog... Damn her soft heart! She should have killed Harking!

"I've never killed him", she whispered, noticing that Alysanne's face dropped, while Wolfius stayed calm. Of course he stayed calm. "Seven Hells, Kersea?", Alysanne muttered, raising an eyebrow. "You... spared him? What in the actual fuck is wrong with you? That was an order"

Kersea gulped. Not the whole truth. She would not tell Alysanne about the man in Braavos she spared. Or about the merchant from the Vale. Yes, she should know better. But just as Wolfius couldn't go against his nature and stop killing people, Kersea couldn't go against her nature. She tried. She tried it hard. Killing like it was nothing. But then again, she would never let break her spirit. She would never let them win. She would never be a killer.

"Technically, his orders were to leave Harking in the woods to the wolves. I have not defied against his will. But... but I thought why should I have the whole fun? The wolves would deserve their share of him too, I guess", she lied through her teeth. She was always good at lying and Alysanne was always bad at reading people. Kersea saw it in her face. She believed her and seemed to be quite happy with it. "A little rabbit, eaten by wolves. May the Seven have mercy on his stupid soul. Still, you really need a taste for the kill. It's more personal this way. And way more fun, especially when you hear them begging not to put your blade into this special spot...", she said and a blissful smile appeared on her face. It filled Kersea with sadness. Alysanne was broken, probably beyond repair. But seeing how far she was truly gone always came as a shock. It always showed Kersea how far she could come herself. How far she would come herself one day, if she continued to walk down this path. Yes, she would never allow Clayton or Butterfly to break her. But maybe that wasn't even necessary. Maybe she was on her way to break herself. Caring became harder with every kill.

Wolfius did not believe her, not one second and she had no illusions about that. But he hadn't told Alysanne or Clayton so far... was he planning something? So far, Wolfius had struck her as little more than an animal, barely able to suppress his nature long enough to live among them. Sure, he and Butterfly shared similar interests, but she doubted that they had some sort of friendship. Seeing someone like him obviously planning something worried her. She knew some of the sick plans Butterfly had planned out and suspected Wolfius to be capable of even worse. But she forced herself to give him a smile. "Is everything alright, Wolfius?", she asked. He smiled back, a cold and emotionless mask of a smile. "Always, Kersea. Though that explains why I couldn't find him later, when I was hungry", he hissed and Kersea's smile was gone in a second. Hungry? He did not just imply...

Before she could continue to think this truly horrifying thought, the sound of footsteps down the stairway drew her attention. For once, she was quite glad that Clayton was there. She did not want to think about it. Wolfius... No! Gods, No! That was sick, even for him!

Clayton gave her a stilted smile and waved with two small pieces of paper. "A raven from Oldtown. New orders from Butterfly. Two people will die tonight", he said softly, almost casually. Two people. No big deal for him. And for her?

Clayton gave Wolfius a look. "You got the dagger from the blacksmith?", he asked. Wolfius gave him a short nod and reached into the depths of his overcoat, pulling out a fine silver

dagger, on the hilt the sigil of House Hoare. Kersea didn't know why Butterfly wanted to frame the Ironborn, but knew she didn't care. She was surrounded by monsters, with monstrous reasons and on her best way to become a monster herself. She had to care about the important things. Two people were going to die tonight...

"Kersea, this will be your target. You will kill her with the dagger. And then you will leave the dagger, but make it look like an accident. Maybe in some poor guard's throat, I don't really care how you do it. Just, don't fail me", he explained, handing her one of the pieces. Kersea took a look on it and her face almost got sorrowful for a moment. Another name on her list... Whoever this Halla Peddle was, Kersea was sure she did nothing to deserve death. Very few people would deserve death. Butterfly. Clayton. Wolfius. Maybe herself, once all of this was done... Yes, maybe she would deserve death herself, maybe as soon as she stopped caring. But there would be nobody left who could give it to her. At least her sister would be safe, that was the only thing that really mattered. Two people were going to die tonight and Kersea wouldn't show mercy. Not this time. Harking was too much mercy and almost got her into trouble. Two people. Two more names on her list.

Clayton looked at her, his forced smile starting to get on her nerves. "You understood everything, Kersea?", he asked. She gave him a nod. "Good. Don't fuck this up. Your target has to die and you have to use this special dagger", he explained. Once again. Why did he always explain it twice to her? She wasn't stupid!

Clayton handed a second note to Wolfius. "This will be your target and her room in the castle. She has to die too, but do with her as you like", he said. Wolfius looked at the note and let out a howling laugh. "Harking! Didn't know he had a daughter! Trust me Clayton, I will enjoy this..." His smile seemed to be as genuine as possible for him. Yes, Kersea had no doubt that he would enjoy this. Harking's daughter... poor girl. Wolfius would likely forget her once he moved on to his next target. But Kersea would remember.

Alysanne seemed to be slightly aghast. "Wait... You send Kersea and Wolfius on a mission? What is with me? I'm here for two fucking weeks and haven't tasted a single kill yet. You got the Maester and the old lord, Wolfius got this random bitch in the streets and Kersea got the rabbit", she protested and gave Clayton a furious look. The man sighed and put his right hand on her shoulder. "Alysanne, my dear, I need you to do something else. It does not involve killing, but it is very important. We will go on a short trip, you and I", he explained. Alysanne shrugged. "Whatever you say, Clayton. But I want to get the next kill", she moaned.

Clayton did not respond to her, instead he looked at Kersea and Wolfius. "I put my trust in you. Both of these targets need to die, Butterfly was very specific here. Screw this up and he will be displeased", he explained. Wolfius gave him a smile. "Sure he will. But I don't do this for him. This will be for my pleasure alone. Jenna Harking... I wonder if there are any more of these Harkings to kill", he hissed, before looking at Kersea.

"You don't want to screw up for your sweet sister's sake, isn't it?", he asked. Kersea gave him a short nod. "Well then... two targets and we have the whole night to kill them... Why don't we work together? I'll help you killing your bitch. And you give me time to have my fun with little Jenna for hours", he smiled. Kersea gave him a slightly disgusted look. Wolfius' definition of fun did not only imply rape... No, he was into far more depraved things. Still... working with him? He was capable. He could be a valuable ally to make sure the mission would succeed. For her sister...

Jenna Harking... another name for her list. Another name, another regret.

## [Agree to work with Wolfius]

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### Lyria

Lyria looked on as Wolfius went down the alleyway. His lean silhouette almost seemed to merge with the shadows of the buildings around him as he walked down the city. From the moment she accepted his offer, she knew that what she was doing was shady business. But the more than generous offer made up for this. But a dagger with the sigil of House Hoare was something different! Lyria felt used, betrayed and more than that, she felt guilty. An Ironborn weapon! Does that mean that Wolfius was working for Harren Hoare? He didn't look like an Ironborn, yet looks could be deceiving. His pale skin hinted at a northern heritage, yet his blonde hair was more common in the Riverlands. Regardless, she had to report him to the city guard. She wouldn't cover one of Harren Hoare's men. As she looked back to where he was walking, she could hardly make him out amid the shadows.

With quick and determined steps, Lyria started to walk down the path that lead to Raylansfairs guardhouse. The city guard wasn't exactly large in numbers, being about fifty men and women strong. So far, she had barely any encounter with them, but she knew that the commander was known as a strict and honourable man, respectable traits in Lyria's opinion. The guardhouse was quite tall, a three-story building completely out of stone, surrounded by a short wall. Two young men stood guard in front of a simple, open iron gate, armed with spears, clad in simple boiled leather armours with the crowned book of Raylansfair imprinted on it. One of the guards, a young man, maybe in his late twenties, with tanned skin, chestnut brown hair and a small stubble beard gave her a friendly nod.

"Good evening! Can I help you?", he asked, while looking at her with dark green eyes. Lyria gave him a relieved nod. She had met him briefly a few years ago. Arthur Nathamer was one of Raylansfairs most well-liked guards, a friendly and forgiving man, sometimes even too forgiving, but always honourable. Coincidentally, he was also the commander's only son. Exactly the man she needed when she was trying to get an appointment with the commander.

"Good evening, my name is Lyria Mettel", she said, trying her best to give him a friendly smile. Lyria was no woman who smiled often, not after the death of her husband and according to some people, her smile looked stilted. Rosalie on the other hand always encouraged her to smile more, telling her that she had a pretty smile. Lyria knew her daughter was lying, at least objectively speaking, but she really couldn't hold it against her. "I would like to have an appointment with the commander. It is important", she explained. Arthur looked at the other guard and shook his head. "Normally you would need an appointment", he explained and Lyria noticed her face dropping. Arthur seemed to notice that too and sighed. "But I can see it is important. You look shaken, good woman. Come in and explain what happened", he said, giving her a small handwave to allow her entrance to the building.

The inside of the building was surprisingly tidy and comfortable. Long wooden benches were located in the main room, being able to give seats to at least fifty people. A warm fire was burning in a fireplace and the air smelled of ale and warm soup. About a dozen men were sitting on the benches, eating something out of wooden bowls, nobody was paying any attention to Lyria. Arthur entered the main room after her, closing the door behind them and pointing at one of the doors. "My father is in his office. He will have time for your concerns

now", he explained. Lyria gave him a thankful nod. Most of Raylansfairs city guard was undoubtedly well-intentioned, but Arthur stood out even among them. His father believed in justice and the law. Arthur believed in mercy and that was something Lyria found much more important in these days. The world would be a better place with more people like Arthur around.

As Lyria walked towards the stairs leading up to the room the commander had for himself, she noticed that she calmed down considerably. She had barely noticed it so far, but the whole deal with Wolfius had gotten on her nerves. At first she had thought that he was barely more than a vagabound. Or at least she had hopes so. But now he was apparently an agent of Harren Hoare. And there was something else... In the moment it happened she hadn't thought about it, but now it was clear, burning in her mind. Wolfius had appeared at her forge only minutes after she finished the dagger. How exactly had he known? Had he spied on her? She knew, she should be worried. But in this moment, she wasn't afraid in the slightest. She wasn't easily worried. And she had the city guard to help her. Lyria wasn't naive, she knew the city guard wasn't the best in the Reach. She knew that Wolfius was dangerous. But she was not afraid. She knocked on the door and waited for an answer.

"Come in", a deep and stern voice called her out. As she entered, she noticed that the commander's office was quite small, much to her pleasant surprise. She had always despised people of power who used their position for personal gain. Apparently Hackor Nathamer was different. Different from Lord Raylan, different from the king. His room was sparsely decorated, his own chair looking far less comfortable than the one in front of his desk, standing there for his guests. The commander himself was looking like an older version of his son. His chestnut brown hair was starting to turn grey, his hairline was slightly receding, yet his eyes still had the emerald green his family was known for. He was taller than most men and quite thin. Judging from his office alone, the only luxury he allowed himself was the iron armour he was wearing, coloured in light green. Lyria recognized the armour and shivered slightly. Her husband's work was unmistakable. Even though she was good, she never reached his level of finesse, at least in her eyes. And this armour was a masterpiece.

"Can I help you?", Nathamer asked, added by "Do you have an appointment?" Lyria shook her head. "Not an appointment, commander, but an important problem", she answered. Nathamer narrowed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Let me guess... Arthur let you in, am I right good woman?", he asked. Lyria did not answer immediately and he rolled with his eyes. "The boy is too soft. But you're here now and I won't throw you out", he sighed, before pointing at the chair in front of him. "Take a seat, good woman. What is your name?", he asked. Lyria gave him a thankful smile and sat down. Even though she preferred standing, she appreciated the gesture. "My name is Lyria Mettel", she explained and noticed Nathamer's eyes widening for a short moment. "You knew my husband. After his death, I continued his work. Last week, a man by the name of Wolfius Woodbark gave me an assignment", she explained, noticing that Nathamer opened his mouth as she mentioned Wolfius.

"Woodbark...", he mumbled. "A short man, lean, rugged, with pale skin and a scarred face?" Lyria gave him a surprised nod. "We already know this man. Last week he harassed the girl working in the inn. Poor Ilish came to us after her shift ended, reporting him, so we could keep an eye on him. Please explain, what assignment has he given to you?", Nathamer said, sternly looking at her. Lyria took a deep breath. She knew she had done nothing wrong, at

least not legally. Nathamer wasn't someone who condemned moral crimes, at least she hoped so.

"He gave me a substantial amount of gold to forge him a dagger with a special sigil embedded in its hilt", she explained. "I had no idea about the nature of this sigil until my daughter pointed it out for me. The sigil was the sigil of House Hoare", she explained and Nathamer took a deep breath. "Fucking Hoare...", he mumbled and Lyria remembered. Sometimes it was hard to remind herself, but she wasn't the only person who had lost someone during the last raid.

"Thank you", he said softly and Lyria could tell that he meant it. When it came to Ironborn, Nathamer was a man who knew how to hold a grudge. He had lost as much as Lyria, maybe even more. She knew, if Hoare would be involved in this, Nathamer would find out. Right now, the commander gave her a sad smile. "Your husband was a good man. This armour saved my life several times. For you and for him, I will find out who this Wolfius is. If he is involved in any dealings with the Ironborn, he will hang", he said, before standing up. "And I shall do so right now"

Lyria gave him a surprised look and Nathamer started to grin. "I hate sitting here all day with nothing but paperwork to do. Ilish described him pretty well, so I'm sure I should be able to recognize him. The same goes for some of my guards", he explained. "I'm actually looking forward for this. A good old-fashioned hunt, like in my days as a captain. Seven Hells, I've missed this feeling!"

Nathamer accompanied her downstairs and only a few moments later, he had half a dozen men ready to accompany him. As Lyria looked at these men, she felt some sort of strange reassurance. She suspected that Wolfius was more cunning than he appeared to be. She knew she wouldn't sleep well until he was dealt with. But she was pretty certain that a man like Hackor Nathamer would be able to get him, sooner or later. Hopefully sooner...

The guardsmen accompanied her for a short while, until her forge was visible, until she was safe. Safe? She wasn't in real danger, was she? Rosalie wasn't in danger, right? Nathamer gave her a friendly nod, before he and his men left to walk down the alleyway Wolfius had been going down a mere hour ago. She looked after them until they weren't visible anymore. She wanted it to be over, wanted to be safe again. But deep down she knew, trouble had just begun for her.

### **No choices for this part**

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#### **Garthon**

It was dark and it rained. Of course, it had to rain. There was no way that the Drowned God couldn't leave Garthon Breaker dry just for a few days before he would inadvertently die. Damn Torvin and his damned sense of responsibility and honour. Of course, honour was a pretty thing to have, but nothing worth dying for. Garthon spent a lifetime in the shadows of his brother learning exactly that. He wasn't as strong as Torvin, he wasn't as skilled as Torvin. All he had was a charming smile and a talent for speaking with people. In the Reach, he would have been a great and beloved man, but in the Kingdom of the Isles and Rivers, his talents were worth nothing. Torvin was able to fight for the family, he demanded respect and sometimes he even got it. Garthon on the other hand was looked down upon. Eloquence was worth less than honour in Harrenhal. Some of Hoare's trusted captains weren't even able to write their own name. But that was okay, as long as they were able to split a skull with one strike. Garthon freely admitted that he had spent too much time in the

Riverlands. He didn't look down on the Riverlords, at least not for the reasons Hoare and his captains looked down on them. Hoare saw them as effeminate weaklings, with wrong gods and wrong customs. But there was nothing wrong with the Seven. And the 'customs' of the Iron Islands included enjoying a past-time activity in which two combatants tried to chop off each others fingers, a way of life that dictated having to fight for everything and a ritual that involved the drowning of infants. Sure, the Drowned God was alright. But the Seven weren't bad either. And all this stuff with the Iron Price? Garthor actually enjoyed the comfort of not having to fight for everything he wants to buy. It wasn't too bad in the Riverlands. And now he was going to die because his brother just can't look away. Lord Tully's problems weren't Torvin's problems. And still, his brother had to plan the assassination of the most dangerous man Garthor ever met. And just as Torvin couldn't ignore the Riverland's problems, Garthor couldn't ignore his brothers problems. And here he was, riding through the rain, with a silent companion, trying his best not to think about his approaching death.

"So.. George...", Garthor tried to initiate a conversation. During the last days, he had almost given up on talking to George. It was not that the boy was rude or brooding. In fact, George was quite friendly, annoyingly friendly and also prone to make light-hearted jokes. Garthor hated light-hearted jokes. But his companion was also shy and a terrible liar. Garthor had noticed quite early during their journey, that George would have preferred travelling with Torvin. Whatever Tully told the boy about Torvin, George believed it and almost idolized him. Knowing the real Torvin, fearsome raider, honourable but definitely not a holy man, brave but definitely not a true knight, it was quite annoying for Garthor to see George worshipping his brother. Anyway, during this weather, he could use at least some sort of conversation over the terrible silence of his thoughts.

His companion looked up, giving him a friendly smile. "Is anything the matter?", George asked. Garthor suppressed a sigh. The thought of Torvin trying to befriend Harlan Hoare cheered him up a little bit. Surely his brother had similar problems. And George was pleasant company compared to Harlan. Yes, Garthor wouldn't want to swap with Torvin.

"I thought we should talk a little bit. We're travelling together for five days now. We're planning on killing a king together. I guess we should get to know each other better", he started. A good start into the conversation, at least from his point of view. George shrugged. "I guess so. Maybe you can tell me something about yourself?", he asked. Garthor rolled with his eyes. Of course, now he was the one who had to do the talking. Well, anything is better than the silence...

"Alright then. Born in Pyke, twenty-four years ago. Four years younger than Torvin. I'm his first mate aboard our ship, the Behemoth", Garthor explained, hoping that the focus of the conversation would finally shift to George. He would actually like to know a bit more about him, not because he was particularly interested in other people or their problems, but because he wasn't quite sure what to make of George. Sure, Tully vowed for him, but Tully was a fish. Garthor was a fisher and looked at things from a different perspective.

George smiled. "Sounds great, but I'm afraid my life isn't that interesting", he started to explain, while Garthor smiled at him. Fucking finally! "I was born twenty years ago. My mother was raped by one of the Ironborn", George said and for a short moment, Garthor felt a sting of guilt. Why? He had never raped anyone. Of course, he had taken a Salt Wife while raiding the Stony Shore a few years ago. But he actually set her free after her continuous kicks and screams started to get on his nerves. Garthor preferred to be a bit more charming in his methods, a bit more seductive than just clubbing the nearest female on the head and

fucking her until she stopped screaming. But the Old Way allowed the Ironborn to basically to what they want with the women they captured during a raid. Some treated their numerous Salt Wives pretty decent. Others hadn't that much decency in them. Garthon had once seen one of Harmund Hoares Salt Wives and had barely dared to fall asleep that night. Ever since the Ironborn took the Riverlands from some ancient Storm King, stories like George's got more common.

"It would be George Rivers, but my father never acknowledged me. In fact I don't even know who he is. He could be a Hoare for what I know", George continued his explanation. Garthon looked him straight in the eyes. Blue eyes, without an ounce of malice in them. Blonde hair as well. "Trust me boy, your father was not a Hoare. You would have realized it by now", he said. "You don't have the eyes for it, or the hair. Every Hoare is dark of hair and dark of heart. Their eyes give them away. You have too much compassion in them. You're no killer" George gave him a sudden sharp glare. "I am one of Lord Tully's most trusted soldiers. I am a killer when I have to", he insisted and Garthon had to suppress a chuckle. He didn't want to provoke the kid, but it was refreshing to see him coming out of his shell for once. "You're a soldier, not a killer. It is a difference. You fight for a cause, to serve and protect. As soon as you loose this cause, you become a killer", he explained.

"What about you, Garthon? Are you a killer?", George asked. His voice was a bit softer now, apparently he calmed down quickly. Garthon did not answer at first. He looked past George, lost in thoughts for a moment. There was the husband of his first Salt Wife. Garthon had used a mace. There was the Lannister soldier in Faircastle. Garthon had used a sword. There was the man in Pyke who had beaten his Rock Wife to death with a club after Garthon tried to seduce her. She had repelled his flirting, hadn't given in to him. Yet her husband had still beaten her to death, as the tradition demanded. Yes, there was the man who had beaten his Rock Wife to death with a club. For him, Garthon had used his bare hands "Interesting question", he finally answered with a quiet voice. The following silence wasn't that bad anymore.

Maidenpool wasn't that far away anymore. George knew the smuggler they were about to contact and had warned Garthon to be wary around the man. The warning was unnecessary. Garthon was always wary around strangers, especially smugglers. From his experience, these people would gladly turn on their customers the moment they had a chance to do it. He once met a smuggler in Orkmont, a scrawny man who sold him some fake pearls he was able to sell to a noblewoman from Blacktyde. Of course, the smuggler told the noblewoman to make even more profit. Luckily, the noblewoman was Ironborn and preferred to castrate the smuggler for his treachery. Garthon got away after blaming one of the people he had gambling debts with. But yes, he was quite wary around smugglers ever since.

In the distance, he noticed lights and for a short moment he thought they would have reached Maidenpool. Of course, his hopes were crushed pretty soon as he realized that the lights were far too few for an actual city. Maybe a village? Or at the very least a tavern. A tavern would be brilliant now! A warm, comfortable bed, a hot meal, maybe a warm bath and if he got extremely lucky a wench for him.

"Hey George!", he called his companion out. The young man looked up and Garthon pointed at the lights. "A tavern!", he explained. George gave him a curious stare and Garthon sighed. Had he explain everything to the boy? "Warm bed. Warm meal. Warm Woman. Very good", he said, speaking slowly and slightly unnerved. George gave him a nod. "I know what a



tavern is, Garthon", he answered. "I just don't know why you're telling me that. If we ride the whole night we might be able to reach Maidenpool in the early morning"

Garthon sighed. "Yes, we might reach Maidenpool in the early morning. Completely exhausted. Soaked to the bone. Hungry", he hissed. George looked at him, seemingly considering what he just said, but as he answered, he still seemed to be unsure. "I would really like of we just get to Maidenpool as quick as possible", he insisted. Damn it, where did Tully even get someone like him? "But I'll leave it up to you", the boy added. Well, that was something. Sure, the boy was right. They could reach Maidenpool in the morning. But that would only bring them closer to their deaths. Garthon looked at the tavern and his stomach growled. He did not want to die hungry.

### **[Stay a night at the tavern]**

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### **Richard**

Richard looked down the path that lead to Roman's farm. No, he could not risk this. Roman was not a bad person, but he held a grudge against Richard, on top of being an ignorant fool who had a problem with sticking to his own land. Besides, like Richard, Roman was no warrior and unlike Richard he was neither tall or muscular. Two hours of walking would not be worth it, even if he would be able to convince Roman of his problems.

He looked at his farm, at the building he had build with his own hands. He knew every corner of it and he would use this to his advantage. The building itself was located with the forest to it's backside, with a small shed to it's left, where Richard kept some tools. As silent as his wounded leg allowed, Richard crouched up to the building. The shed. He needed to get to the shed. Needed to get some sort of weapon. Pain flashed through his wounded leg as he laid stress on it, but he kept ignoring it. He had no time to rest. Jenna was in danger, if not dead already. Wolfius was somewhere out there, maybe even in his house. His house! He had built it for his family, in better times. Wolfius had no right to defile it with his presence! More angry than he had ever been in his life, Richard reached the shed. It wasn't locked, he rarely locked it when simply going to the town for one evening... but now it had been open for five days. He opened the door and with a quick look he saw that it hadn't been looted. Not exactly. It had been searched. Someone had thrown the tools to the ground and thoroughly rummaged through his few belongings. Richard looked down on the ground and saw his axe. Normally he would cut firewood with it. But not now... He knew he should be able to split a skull with it. The question was, would he be able to do it? Richard had never killed another man. Sure, he had been into his fair share of brawls. Once he had broken a man's nose. But he had never killed someone. "It will be easy", Richard mumbled. "It will be easy"

He left the shack and moved towards the backside of his house. The windows there were built high, so he didn't need to crouch that much to remain unseen. And there was a backdoor, a freshly oiled backdoor. Richard crouched up to the backdoor, ignoring the horrible pain in his leg. Yes, after this day he would gladly rest for a whole week, if not longer. Luckily the bone wasn't broken or else he wouldn't be able to walk at all, but the damage done to the flesh of his lower leg was bad enough already.

The door opened without a noise and Richard let out a small grin. That went well! He grabbed the axe tighter and stepped inside his living room, suppressing a pained sigh as he looked over the room in complete disarray. Nothing was missing from what he could see, but

it was clear that somebody had been looking for something. The drawers in his small cupboard were open, the large chest in the corner of the room had been searched. A noise got Richards attention. Somebody was still there, somebody was still looking for something in his house. The noise came from his bedroom, the second largest room in the house, located to his right. The door was wide open as Richard sneaked up on it.

"Fuck... Fuck here has to be something. Come on man, don't leave me hanging...", Richard heard someone mumble. He looked into the room and saw someone, a lean man with short brown hair, who had his back turned on Richard and was leaning over Richard's private chest, searching through his belongings. That was not Wolfius, that was simply a common intruder, a thief maybe. Still, Richard felt anger inside of him. He was gone for five days and some asshole was already searching through his belongings... Richard started to sneak up on the man, gripping his axe slightly looser. He would not kill him, but he would smash his teeth and break his nose. He would not kill him. He would not...

A sudden and extreme flash of pain exploded in his leg as he made an unwary step, putting far too much weight on his damaged leg. A scream of pain forced its way out of his throat as he fell down on the ground, the axe landing next to him with a loud noise. He heard a surprised outcry as he was still facing the ground, breathing heavily. He heard footsteps nearing and managed to slightly pull himself up, seeing the legs of the man who broke into his house.

"Richard?", the man asked. The voice sounded familiar now. Too familiar... No! No, that was impossible! Why would he...? Richard forced himself to get up enough so that he was able to look the man in the face. For one moment he was frozen in shock. The face he was looking into was his own. Younger, clean-shaven, slightly longer, with a crooked smile and overly confident brown eyes. But the similarity to his own face was almost uncanny. The man in front of him was his brother!

"A... Alan", Richard mumbled in shock, finally getting up again. In front of him stood Alan Harking, his younger brother. A man who had taken so much from him. His brother. His best friend in childhood. A man he wanted to kill for a short time. Alan gave him a wide, sleazy smile. "Richard!", he exclaimed, stepping forwards and pulling him into a tight hug.

"Brother!", he exclaimed again and Richard let out a pained moan as he was forced to put weight on his damaged leg. Alan let go of him and looked at him with a wide grin. "I thought you weren't here. I called. I waited several minutes. Oh Richard, this is wonderful!", he chuckled and finally noticed the look of pure anger in Richard's face. "Richard? Is someth...", he started, but was cut off by Richard punching him in the face. The punch was strong enough to make Alan fall to the ground, Richard standing above him, trembling with anger, trembling with relief.

"Ouch. Seven fucking Hells, my nose!", Alan moaned as he was getting up on his feet again.

"What was that for?", he asked as Richard stepped forwards again, this time to pull his brother into a hug. "What are you doing here, Alan?", Richard asked, for a moment forgetting everything that had been between them. For one moment he was simply a brother again, a brother who just met one of the few family members he had still left. His younger brother, his worst enemy for so many years, a man who had taken so much from him and gave him so few. His brother...

As he looked at Alan, he saw that his brother was smiling too. Blood was running down his nose and he was clearly in pain, but he was smiling too. "Gods, I probably deserved that, right?", Alan asked, before looking down. "Damn it Richard, what happened to your leg?", he

asked. Richard shook his head. "Long story, Alan", he answered and sat down in his bed. "You first. What are you doing here? Why were you searching through my belongings?" Alan sat down next to him letting out a small laugh. "Mother have mercy, all these years... I was passing through, saw your house. I wanted to see how you're doing, brother", he answered. Alan was a compulsive liar, one of the hardest lessons in Richard's life had consisted of finding this out. And now he was good at spotting his brother's lies. The small ones, the big ones. The ones he just told for fun, the ones he told with the intention to trick others, to cheat, to steal. "Alan...", he said with a stern voice and his brother slightly shivered for a moment.

"Okay... okay, you got me. I wasn't just passing through... I mean, I really want to see how you're living now, brother, I really do. I mean... how's your wife? Erna, wasn't it?", Alan answered and Richard narrowed his eyes. "Elma...", he hissed and Alan gave him a slight nod. "Yes, yes, Irma, of course. Anyway, how is she?", he answered and Richard suppressed the urge of punching him again. "She is dead", he muttered. "Starved to death, because we had no money for food!" His voice got sharper and he glared at Alan. It was hard to tell when Alan was truly serious, but for one moment he seemed genuinely saddened. "Listen Richard... I never wanted...", he mumbled, before stopping. "I am sorry, brother. I truly am" Richard could tell that he was at least half serious. Now, that was a start. Richard was a family man. There was a time in which he and Alan were truly close. This time was long gone and Richard was sure it would never come back. But still... family was family. "What are you doing here, Alan?", he asked again.

For one moment, Alan seemed a bit helpless. "I didn't know where else I should go, brother", he answered and Richard gave him a surprised look. "But... the money, Alan. All the money...", he mumbled and Alan avoided his stare. "I made a few bad decisions. A deal gone bad. I owed a few very nasty people a very large sum of money. It is gone...", he muttered and Richard had to seriously suppress the urge to beat his brother senseless. The money! All the money that had rightfully been his, until Alan came along. Sure it hadn't been Alan alone. Other relatives were involved, other relatives who probably convinced him. But it had mainly been his fault. All the money... There were days in which Richard could only imagine how his life would have turned out, if it weren't for Alan, who took it all away. Elma would still be alive... Maybe his sons would be at home. Jenna wouldn't need to work for this terrible housekeeper. For one moment, Richard Harking was genuinely devastated.

Alan looked at him, apparently genuinely sorrowful. "Listen Richard, I'm sorry. I never meant for this to happen... But I need your help", he pleaded and Richard looked up, looked him right in the eyes. "My help...", he hissed. "You need my help?" He couldn't help, a sad smile appeared on his face. This was irony. A tragic form of irony. Alan took everything from him. Even though he wasn't evil, he was indirectly responsible for everything that happened. And now he wanted his help. His brother looked almost hopeful. "Yes! Yes, brother, please. I have nowhere else to go. It's only for a few weeks. Until I found work. Until I'll be able to sleep somewhere else. Listen, Richard, I know this is awkward. I did a terrible thing and now I need your help. You have every right to be angry. But can you turn your back on me, your little brother? I did a mistake. I did plenty of mistakes. But, Richard, I am a changed man. Let me prove it. I know, I can never give you back what you have lost. But I can help you. I mean, look at your leg. I can work for you, on the fields, like I did in the good old days!", he pleaded with a hasty voice.

The good old days! These days had never been. Looking back on it, it had always been Alan doing something to screw over everything and everyone. But Richard hadn't seen it back then. There was a time in which he and Alan have been genuine friends and part of Richard still wanted this times back. Part of Richard wanted to believe this obvious lie his brother was telling. Part of Richard wanted to kill him for everything that happened. But there was one thing Alan was right with. Richard wasn't able to turn his back on Alan. No matter what happened, Alan was family. And family was something he couldn't choose. He had to help him.

"You can stay in the shack", Richard answered and his brother gave him a hug. "Oh, Richard, brother, thank you! You are a good man, a just man. I knew I could count on you!", Alan shouted and Richard had to push him away. "Only until you've found something else", he insisted and Alan gave him a nod. "Only until I've found something else!"

Alan clapped his hands. "Yes, brother! You won't regret it, I promise!", he said. Richard already regretted it. "What were you doing here, Alan?", he asked. He already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from Alan. He wanted to hear that Alan tried to steal from him again. Alan gulped. "Like I said, I needed your help. So I went to your house. I knocked. I waited. I called everyone. Your neighbour, this Roman fellow, he passed through and told me that he hasn't seen you for a few days... so I assumed you were gone for a while", he explained, looking a bit helpless for a moment. "So, I let myself in. I still knew a few tricks. I wanted to look if you have... you know anything of value. I would have brought it back! I have an idea, a plan if you want to say. It's a sure thing. I will be rich again. And I would have paid you back!", he explained. Richard looked at him, furious, unable to say anything. "You would have stolen from me... again", he mumbled and Alan shook his head. "Only borrowed! It's not stealing if you intend to give it back, brother!", he answered with a weak voice.

Richard's gaze fell on the long bundle leaning on the wall. His father's sword. He looked at Alan and Alan looked back, his face suddenly pale. "No... Oh no, please brother, you can't mean to... That would be kinslaying! You can't seriously mean to... I am your brother!", he stuttered. But that wasn't what Richard had in mind.

His brother was lean, someone who had never worked for anything his whole life. But he was healthy. He could help. He wasn't ideal, but he was the only one available. "Alan...", Richard said sternly and his brother's smile faded. "You are an asshole and believe me that I would gladly break your legs for everything you did. I'm letting you stay here and you will be working for me. That does not mean that I will forget or forgive. What you did can't be forgiven. But you can make amends for it. I need you to do something for me", Richard said and Alan looked at him, almost eager to help. "Everything, Richard!", he exclaimed. "Just name it and I will do it for you! I know, you are angry and I know you have every right to be. I know you will never forgive me and I don't even expect this. I am a changed man and I want to make amends. Tell me what needs to be done!"

Richard looked at his brother. Alan was unreliable, he had always been unreliable. But he had also always been fond of Jenna, at least in the few short years he had known her. Alan was not a bad person at heart, he was just greedy and selfish and he acted without thinking what this would mean for others. Richard could never forgive him, he would never forgive him. But he was willing to let him make amends. He was willing to accept that his brother was indeed able to change.

"Lot's of things happened, brother", he explained. "Jenna is working at the castle now" This gave Alan a bright smile. "Little Jenna? I always knew she would make it far! She is her

uncle's niece", he grinned and Richard shook his head. "She is nothing like you, Alan. She is gentle, genuinely friendly and she is willing to put the interests of others first", he hissed and Alan looked slightly insulted. Before his brother could say anything, Richard continued.

"The people who did this to me", he said and pointed on his damaged leg. "These people have plans here in the city. One of them is a man who goes by the name of Wolfius Woodbark" Alan raised an eyebrow. "Come on Richard, now you're kidding me. That is not his true name. Trust me, I have experience with fake names", he said and Richard shrugged. "I don't care if it is his real name or not. He is dangerous. Deadly dangerous. He murdered a young girl, likely without any provocation. He is a killer and a beast and a man we should fear", he explained.

Alan looked a bit unsure for a moment. "This... Wolfius, he did this to you?", he asked. "I mean... your leg. And your face. That looked pretty serious. Is he that dangerous? I mean, you're so strong...", he muttered. Richard gave him a slight smile. "Strength does not mean anything when your opponent cheats. He had friends with him, associates of some sort. One of them had a crossbow and shot me in the leg", he answered.

Alan almost jumped. "Crossbow? I hate fucking crossbows!", he exclaimed, breathing heavily. Richard could not blame him, not this time. Alan was afraid. And to be honest, Richard was afraid too. But it wasn't his own life he was afraid of.

"Another associate of Wolfius, a young woman did this to my face. She beat me up and left me to die. I spent the last week in the company of a madman, lying barely conscious under a bridge. And for some miracle, my leg is not broken", he explained but stopped as he saw Alan giving him a wide grin. "What is it?", Richard asked, slightly irritated.

"A girl beat you up. A girl...", he giggled, but quickly stopped as Richard gave him a furious glare. "A trained killer, apparently", he hissed and Alan gave him a sarcastic nod. "Sure. Trained killer. If you say so... a girl", he chuckled and Richard decided that any further explanation would be pointless.

"The last thing I've heard before loosing consciousness was Wolfius mocking me. He told me he would kill Jenna. And I believe he is going to target her soon", he explained and saw Alan's face getting serious again. "He wants to kill Jenna? But... why?", he stuttered. "My sweet niece, getting targeted by some deranged killer..."

Richard forced himself to stand up. The pain in his leg was almost bearable again. He was able to walk, yes, he was able to fight. He had to be careful of course, but he knew he was stronger than Wolfius. He would only need to strike him once to kill him. It would be possible.

"I am going to the castle. I have to warn Jenna. I have to warn the acting lord and the commander of the city guard. I know where Wolfius is hiding and I know what he did", he said and looked at Alan. "And I'm going to need your help, little brother"

Alan's face got pale as he opened his eyes in shock. "My help? You just said they have crossbows! Do you really need my help?", he stuttered and Richard rolled with his eyes. His brother was a coward when it came to things like this! "Yes, Alan, I need your help!", he hissed. "For everything you did, for Jenna, I will need your help"

With these words he grabbed the long bundle at the wall. His father's sword... He had never really used it. He was no warrior. His father had been a soldier, a man of respect and wealth. A hero of war. But Richard was not a soldier. He was just a farmer, just a father. But right now, in this place, being a father was worth more than ten soldiers. Nothing could stop him now, not from what he was going to do! There had been many people who screwed him over in his life. Alan had been one of the worst. But Wolfius... he was even worse. He stepped

into his life with no regards for anything, he destroyed and murdered just like he wanted. He killed that poor girl on the streets and now he would target Jenna. Just to please his sick pleasure... How could he dare? How could he dare!

The sword felt good in his hands. Cold, valuable steel. One of the few belongings he had left from his father. The only thing he could never sell. It wasn't a very elegant weapon, not worthy of a knight, but more than worthy of a simple farmer. His father had always kept it sharp and after his death, Richard continued with this tradition. It was a weapon ready to kill. Richard looked back at Alan. "We are going to the castle, together. We will help Jenna, you and I. Together, like in the good old times. You will help me!", he ordered and Alan looked at him, completely helpless.

"But... but... crossbows...", he stuttered. "I can't help you with this, Richard. I am weak, I am not a fighter. I would only slow you down. Leave me here. I will tidy up your house. I will help you, but I can't fight for you. Please, brother, you can't demand that from me...", he pleaded. Richard looked at his cowardly brother. He couldn't demand that from him? He was the one holding the sword! But would Alan really be a help?

**[Force Alan to help you]**

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### **Torvin**

Torvin looked at Gabin who gave him a barely visible nod and then back at Harlan, who had a bright, disturbingly cheerful smile on his face. No, he did not like this. This was not how he would do things. But this was how he had to do things. And he really didn't want to meet Harmund Hoare. "So, what shall it be, Breaker? A bit of fun now, or do you want to save it for later?", Harlan chuckled. Torvin stared back, forcing himself to give the prince a sick smile. "Now sounds just perfect", he answered and Harlan let out a deep laugh. "That's the spirit!", he shouted, patting Torvin on the back, before looking back at Gabin. Torvin saw that his ally was slightly flinching as Harlan looked at him. "Gabin!", he shouted. "What's it with you? You want to join the fun?"

Gabin did well in controlling his face. Torvin knew how afraid the man were in this moment. He was from the Riverlands and no matter how long he spent in the company of Ironborn, there were some things only true iron could withstand. The overwhelming brutality of a Hoare was one of these things. "I... I would be honored, Prince Harlan", he answered and Harlan grinned at Holt. "Holt, you sick bastard! Go, give these two some toys. Tonight we're going to have some real fun", he shouted and Holt gave him a cold glare. It was clear that the torturer did not share Harlan's joy. He took his job seriously and Torvin knew immediately that he was the more dangerous out of the two. He had heard stories about Holt Torv. The man has been a sellsword, then a butcher, before Harren Hoare heard about his special talents and hired him as Harrenhal's master torturer. Never before had the dungeons been filled with so many screams of agony. Even though the cells lay deep below the castle, there were nights in which Torvin could hear them. No, he had never met Holt Torv. But he had heard about him and his works.

Holt limped towards Torvin, handing him a long, sharp skinner knife, while staring him right in the eyes. He was a fat and horrifyingly ugly man, his face disfigured by warts, but his blue eyes were genuinely bright, yet ice-cold and dead. "Are you ready for this?", he hissed. "I can promise, you will have nightmares" Torvin met the torturer's stare without flinching. "I don't get nightmares that easily", he answered. Holt shrugged. "Never implied you would get

them easily, Breaker. You're Ironborn after all. Still, I can promise, you will have nightmares" Gabin let out a slight sigh and Holt glared at him. "If you're too weak to slice and cut some meat, you can go and fuck yourself, Gabin", he hissed and Gabin slightly shivered. "No... No, it's alright. I'm just not feeling well. Probably got a cold", he answered. Holt gave him a slight joyless smile. "Probably...", the torturer mumbled.

Harlan clapped his hands, before grabbing his cleaver. "Okay then! We're visiting a few really nasty people. Fucking traitors and bloody fucking rebels. People who wanted to kill father. And tonight, we're going to break them" He raised his cleaver before looking down at the tortured woman next to him. A sick smile formed around his lips as he made a sudden movement, deeply embedding the cleaver in her skull. Harlan looked at Holt and raised his eyebrows. "What? Don't give me that look, cripple. The bitch had nothing to say anyway, right? Guess she was innocent", he chuckled. Holt shook his head. "They are all guilty, my prince. You just have to dig deep enough and ask the right questions. Underneath the skin, every man is guilty of something", he explained. Harlan let out a loud laugh. "You're a smart man, Holt", he chuckled, before grabbing the torturer's arm. "Mind your place, cripple", he hissed and for one moment his voice sounded like his father's.

Holt gave the prince a cold glare. "I always mind my place", he answered before limping away. Harlan looked after him, quickly regaining his cheerful face. "He's charming, isn't he?", he muttered and grabbed Torvin and Gabin at the shoulders. "You two, my friends, you two will learn some new tricks today! Breaker, have you ever butchered a bitch? The joy of separating skin from flesh, the lovely sound of their screams. In some way, I give them a purpose", he explained and looked Torvin straight in the eyes. His dark eyes were looking amused and Torvin couldn't help but feel slight anger at Gabin. He had told him that Harlan wasn't bad for a Hoare. But here in the dungeons, Torvin saw a madman, a man who was truly convinced of what he said. The king never hid the fact that he was a brutal and bloodthirsty tyrant. But Harlan... he would have been able to pass as a human being on the streets. He had something casual on him and that was much worse than the irredeemable brutality his father and his older brother displayed.

"A purpose, my prince?", Gabin asked and Torvin sighed. He had dealt with insanity before and he knew when it was better to stay silent. Harlan's smile got a bit wider. "A purpose", he whispered. "Isn't it the purpose of every man and woman to serve their king? I might not be their king, but I am second in line to the throne" Torvin had to look away. Yes, he had already dealt with insanity. But Harlan was different. He was a legitimately insane man who was allowed to fully live his depravity. They were all depraved, Torvin remembered, every Hoare in different ways. And yet, Harlan Hoare was the second best of Harren's sons...

Harlan lead them through the maze of corridors that formed the dungeons of Harrenhal, always following the muffled sound of Holt Torv's limping steps. Soft weeping was heard in the dark cells next to them, but Harlan's torch wasn't bright enough to illuminate them. It was probably for the better. Torvin was not a cruel man. He never felt any particular joy in killing and torture just for the pleasure of seeing people in pain made him sick. This kingdom made him sick, this castle made him sick, this dungeon made him sick, this monster of a man made him sick. But he gave a promise to Lord Tully. He would not back out now, he was too deep into it already. He would either kill the king or die trying. One way or the other, people would remember his name and that was all that mattered.

Accompanied by Harlan, Torvin and Gabin entered a small chamber. Holt was already there, igniting several torches. Torvin noticed two men chained to the wall in a small cell inside of

the room. A multitude of tools was spread out on the table in the centre of the room. Unexpectedly, they were clean and in perfect condition, no trace of blood on them. The blades were sharpened, the pliers polished. A neat and tidy torture chamber... Sometimes, Torvin suspected that the Drowned God had a horrible sense of humour.

Harlan stepped forwards, pointing at the men. "These two helped the Trident fuckers", he explained and Torvin understood. These men were rebels, who helped the Sons of the Trident. The Sons, lead by the infamous Lord of the Marches, while neither the biggest nor the most cruel band of outlaws, were mercilessly hunted by the Ironborn, because their goal wasn't a life without rules, but a life in an independent Kingdom of the Trident, spanning all across the Riverlands, a life under a new King, chosen from the Riverlords. Not for the first time, Torvin asked himself if that would be what his defiance would lead to. If that was what he truly wanted to achieve... An independent kingdom of the Riverlands... Yes, if this would keep his family safe, if this would secure him his place in history, he would do it!

Harlan opened the first cell. "Let's see what this little Rivercunt has to say", he hissed. Holt cleared his throat. "My prince, if you could bring him out of his cell, closer to the table, I'd be able to start with the interrogation", he explained and Harlan glared at him. "Don't tell me what to do", the prince growled, but he opened the prisoners chains regardless. Holt sighed. "That was not what I meant, my prince. Opening his chains like this could be dangerous. If you just...", he started but what cut off by Harlan. "I'm trying to have a bit of fun here, so do me a favour and fuck yourself"

Holt shook his head, while Torvin looked at the scene with morbid fascination. It was a small miracle that Harlan Hoare survived the first thirty years of his life. The prince had turned around to glare at Holt, completely ignoring the unchained prisoner for a moment. The man, a tall and muscular man in his early thirties, wasted no time and grabbed Harlan, wrapping the chains with which he had been bound seconds ago around the prince's throat, all of this in a matter of second. Torvin actually had to give him an impressed look. That was not bad for a man who had been chained to a wall for days.

"Come closer and I'll break his neck!", the man screamed. "I have nothing to do with the Sons, but I will kill him regardless if you don't let me go!" Holt looked at Torvin and shook his head. "You must be new to my dungeons. Nobody leaves them, not in one piece", he growled, while Harlan gurgled, his eyes widened in fear, looking helplessly at Torvin. "You will let me go, or I will kill this man!", the prisoner hissed, clearly almost as angry as he was afraid.

Torvin became aware of the knife he still had in his hand. It wasn't a throwing knife, sure, but he had always been good with them. Harlan Hoare wasn't worth saving, but saving him would ensure his friendship. It would be one step closer to the king. But if he threw the knife and missed, Harlan Hoare would be dead, as well as every other person in this room. There was one good thing Torvin could say about Harren Hoare. The king loved his sons and violently punished anyone who wronged them. If only Garthor would be here! His brother knew how to defuse such a situation. But maybe Torvin learned enough from him to end this without bloodshed. Maybe...

### **[Throw the knife]**

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#### **John**

His first impulse was to storm the inn. That was how he always managed things. But that was also how he lost two good friends in a similar situation. And he knew the Hammered



Harp had a small entrance behind the kitchen. He only needed to sneak around the building. He looked behind him and saw the frightened face of Cass, as well as the determined and angry face of Kyyette. "You two stay close to me", he ordered. "You're safer with me than on your own" Cass seemed to be quite relieved by this, while Kyyette only gave him a shrug. She even picked up the sword of the man Cass had killed and Gutten gave her a surprised look. "What?", she hissed. "I was born in Oldtown. You don't survive there if you don't learn a few tricks"

Gutten gave her a short grin, before turning around to the inn again. He had to stay silent. He had to be sneaky. Seven Hells, he hated being sneaky! He went down a bit and started to move forwards, as quick as possible. From inside of the tavern, a surprised woman's scream could be heard. That must have been Gunel. Janae and Samantha wouldn't scream at some bandits, they would make them scream. Cass gasped in terror, but for a church girl she had a remarkable composure. Gutten heard the sound of clashing steel, even louder than his own heartbeat and fastened his pace. He would not loose any friend today!

The back entrance wasn't locked. It was a small door that lead directly to the kitchen. For a short moment, John had the urge to just burst in, but he slightly hesitated. No... he was trying to go for a stealthy approach. He pointed his sword towards the door, softly touching the handle of the door. A loud scream was heard right behind the door. Ah, fuck stealth! Gutten raised his sword and kicked the door in with a single kick. Behind it, he saw Gunel who cowered in one of the kitchen's corners. And he saw a young man with dark brown hair, a man he didn't know, a man who was about to storm at Gunel. The man gave him a surprised look, but didn't hesitate to change the target of his attack. Gutten parried his first strike, but the second made him slightly fall back, stepping out of the kitchen again. His opponent was a strong man. His opponent was a dead man. Gutten parried a second strike and a third, before attacking, a swift, but strong strike to the man's chest. His opponent parried the strike, but had considerable difficulty and slightly staggered, only for a moment too long. John's second strike targeted his opponent's throat, slicing through it like a hot knife through butter.

Breathing heavily, John finally entered the kitchen, stepping over his dying opponent. He gave Gunel a sharp look. "How many are there?", he asked, as the old woman got up on her feet again. "At least half a dozen. Your people do their best, but...", she said, but Gutten didn't even bother to continue listening. Half a dozen? That shouldn't be too hard! He looked at Cass and Kyyette. "You two stay back", he hissed and noticed that Cass' eyes widened. Tears were flowing down her face. "Stay safe, John", she whispered and Gutten gave her a smile. "I don't intend to die", he chuckled, before turning around, almost bumping into Behara. The young woman had a bloody knife in her hand, her eyes widened with fear. "John!", she shouted. "Gods, John, you have to help them!" John gave her a soft look. "Stay here. If anyone of these fuckers comes into this room, you kill him", he said and Behara gave him a slight nod. "Good girl", John grinned, before storming into the inn's main room. He saw Temari fighting in the centre of the room against three opponent's at once. One man lay dead on the floor in front of him. The mercenary was the only one in the room who actually wore heavy armour. Aylard had his warhammer in his hands swinging it at a man who staggered back. Samantha only had a small kitchen knife and wasn't even wearing any armour, but she was still swinging furious strikes at a man in front of her. Behind her, Sawyer Kawl was lying on the ground, weeping, his eyes wide open. One of the bandits fighting

against Temari noticed John and decided to change his target, charging at him, which in turn lead to Temari slightly moving, so that he was able to fight while looking at him.

"John!", he shouted, while hacking at one of his opponents. "Nice to see you joining the fun!" Gutten chuckled while stabbing at the charging bandit. "Couldn't let you have all the fun, could I?", he shouted while impaling the bandit with his sword. He saw Temari receiving a heavy blow to the belly, saw the sword failing to go through the armour. For a moment, Gutten held his breath. The mercenary laughed and retaliated by striking at the bandit's unguarded head. "Who's laughing now at the man who's wearing the armour?", Temari shouted and Gutten heard an annoyed sigh from Samantha, who was still trying to overcome one of the bandits. "Yeah, fuck you too, Temari. A little help here, John?", she shouted. Gutten charged forwards, as the bandit turned around, facing him. This was a mistake, but he didn't even get to realize it anymore as Samantha leaped forwards, embedding her knife in his neck. She gave John a thankful smile. Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Aylard swinging his hammer down on his opponent, hitting him in the face. The bandit fell to the ground, trying to get away, but Aylard mercilessly swung his hammer down on him. The way he held the hammer impressed John. He never liked warhammers, for him they were big, unhandy weapons, too blunt to effectively kill an enemy with it. But Aylard apparently had some experience with it. The innkeeper didn't got out of this fight unscathed though. John saw blood running down his shoulder, he saw the painful expression on Aylard's face. Temari let out a loud roar as he slashed his sword across his last opponent's face. The bandit fell to the ground, screaming and clutching the deep cut that spanned across his whole face. He didn't scream for long, as Temari didn't waste any time to drive his sword through the man's neck. Gutten smiled, looking over the corpses of the fallen bandits. They hadn't expected a serious fight and died like the sorry excuses for animals they were. Temari held his ribs, apparently slightly in pain, but Samantha was unwounded. Aylard staggered back, his face pale and Gutten walked up to him. "Hey, hey, easy now", he mumbled, grabbing the innkeeper at the unwounded shoulder. He noticed that Aylard was trembling in pain. "My son...", he mumbled and John looked over to Sawyer, who was apparently unharmed. "He is fine, Aylard", he answered and felt Aylard's relief. Gutten looked up to Temari. "Are you okay?", he asked. The mercenary nodded. "It's not broken", he mumbled, clutching his ribs

Samantha stepped up to him. "Janae is upstairs, getting our weapons. Her bow. My axes. I assume there will be more of them", she explained and Gutten nodded in agreement. He noticed that her face was stern and hard. "John, I think we could survive this", she said, before pointing at Aylard. "But if he fights again... Or if someone gets in through that back entrance. Not all of us have experience" John narrowed his eye. He knew, she was speaking the truth. They all survived this first attack, but Stranger behold a second attack. "What are you suggesting?", he asked and Samantha gave him a thankful smile. She was smart, he had to give her that and her advice was always sound. "I'll protect them. We will leave through the backside, while you fight them here", she explained. Gutten raised an eyebrow. Samantha Ducard running from a fight? He must have gotten her harder than he thought with him refusing her request. But she was right. Cass, Kyette, Gunel, Sawyer and the wounded Aylard had little chance to survive this if they wouldn't be protected. But they weren't his problem...

Cass came to mind. Her smile. Her laugh. Her bright red hair. The way she moved when dancing. Gutten closed his eye, refusing to remember Orkmont. She had called him

kinslayer... No, he was wrong! They were his problem! He looked at Samantha, noticing that his face slightly dropped. "You are right...", he whispered. "One of us should go with them. I will stay and fight. And I need Janae here. You want to go?"

Samantha gave him a smile. "Didn't thought you would agree, John. Yes, if you allow it, I will go", she smiled. Temari stepped up, still holding his ribs. "My sister will go with them too. And... Sammy, nothing against you, but... John, I would like to protect her myself. She is the only one I have left and... I wear heavy armour. I can protect them, better than Sammy ever could", he explained and got a cold glare from Samantha. "Hey, I told you, nothing against you!", he quickly added. Samantha snorted and gave Temari a sly smile. "Gods, please Temari, you are wounded. It's pretty obvious that I'll be better at protecting these people", she said, before her smile turned bright and sweet as silk. "Nothing against you, okay?", she added.

Temari didn't answer beyond a short glare. "John will decide", he declared, looking at Gutten. It was true, he wore heavy armour and was the only one who did so. He could be able to protect Aylard and his family, but he could also be a valuable asset in the coming fight. However, he was also slightly wounded and Gutten didn't knew how much this wound would affect him, either by protecting these people, or by fighting. Maybe Samantha would be a safer choice. And even though she had a pleased look on her face, Gutten could tell that she was still furious for denying her request the first time.

#### **[Let Samantha protect Aylard and his family]**

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#### **Lucas**

Leonard was angry, it was clear to see. Lunett on the other hand seemed genuinely sorry. Tears were flowing down her face and she was sobbing uncontrollably. "I'm sorry", she whispered. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you, I just wanted get away from this inn for once" She didn't even look him in the eye and Lucas felt a sting of pity for her. But he could also understand Leonard's anger. Lunett had been a welcome travelling companion, but she wasn't used to long travels and slowed them down considerably. Without her, they would have arrived in Oldtown at least two days ago. Two days in which they could have already found Dairon. Two days in which Dairon could have been killed by someone in these streets. As much as he'd like to, Lucas just couldn't comfort her right now.

He gave her a cold look. "We're talking about this later", he said and looked at the tower in the distance. Lunett gave him a sad look. "I'm sorry...", she whispered again, causing Leonard to angrily shake his head. "It's a little too late for that. If the boy is dead, his blood is on your hands", the knight hissed in anger, before looking at Lucas. "We should find some place to stay, some place where we can put her without risking any other distraction", he said. Lunett shivered as she heard his words and Lucas felt compassion for her. Surely, she had made a mistake, but Leonard was hard with her, maybe even too hard. But he was definitely right with one thing. It was close to sunset and they had to find some place to stay the night. And regardless of the problems Lunett caused them, Lucas wanted to keep her safe. Cities like this inclined to change after sunset. And to be honest, Oldtown didn't seem like a city where he would leave a young girl alone, not even before sundown.

"Guess you're right, Len", Lucas mumbled and Leonard gave him a joyless grin. "Of course I am", he hissed and looked at Lunett. "Come, girl. Time to find you some room where you can stay the next days until we have found Dairon. And pray that he is not dead" This caused Lunett to start sobbing again and Lucas actually couldn't contain giving Leonard a short

glare. The knight was too hard on her! Leonard caught the glare and let out a slightly annoyed sigh. "What? You think I have fun here? We could have been back on the road by now if it weren't for her", he moaned, before shrugging. "But I don't want to deal with this here. Let's find some inn, get her a room and then we'll talk"

With these words, Leonard started to walk. The sobbing Lunett followed closely, with Lucas walking next to her. "Lucas...", she mumbled and the knight gave her a short look. "I'm sorry. I never thought I could hurt anyone with this"

Leonard slightly turned his head around without facing her completely. "You never thought, that's your problem", he hissed and Lunett was silent for a moment. Not for the first time, Lucas asked himself why Leonard reacted like this whenever people lied to him. He took it hard and personal. And he acted meaner than he usually did. Lucas knew, Leonard cared for Lunett, or at least he thought so. The harsh reaction surprised him. Sure, she made a mistake and Leonard had all the right to be angry... but blaming her for Dairon's possible death took it a step too far.

"I'm sorry...", Lunett mumbled again and this time Lucas had to give her a short and worried look. She had been so excited to be in Oldtown, but now she barely stopped sobbing. "I know", Lucas answered, before staying silent again.

Leonard knew the city not too well, but certainly knew where he was taking them. Lucas on the other hand was lost pretty soon. Oldtown had been built differently than the Free Cities. While Pentos and Volantis had been built with a plan, adding an easily understandable street system to their pleasant appearance, Oldtown had grown far beyond it's Valyrian foundations. The city sprawled into each direction, almost like weeds. And Lucas was quite happy with their decision to look for a tavern. The sun was already down and he saw more and more people on the streets he would never expect in a city of Reach. Shady looking people that would be more befitting of the dark streets of Qohor. Desperate looking men and women, more befitting to the crowded streets of Volantis. He wouldn't have been too surprised if a group of Bravos would cross their paths, looking for a fight. In his months after his return from Essos, Lucas had often asked himself where the dregs of Reach's population would reside and sadly, he finally got his answer. He didn't need to stay here for long to understand that this city was rotten to the core and without Leonard as a guide, Lucas would have been lost. The knight guided them well and soon stopped in front of a three-story building. A tinged metal shield informed Lucas that this building was called 'Blind Helmsman' and judging from the noise and smell that was coming from the inside, it was quite probably an inn.

Leonard looked almost proud as he presented the inn. "It might not look like much, but it's patrons are mainly soldiers and guardsmen. Mostly honest folks, by Oldtown standards at least. A bit on the rough side, but I have never seen a Butterfly in there", he grinned and entered the building. Lucas gave Lunett a short look. The girl was still shaken, but had been quiet for their trip through the city, safe for a few sobs. He gave her a consoling smile, which she did not reciprocated.

The interior of the inn looked exactly as Lucas expected. One thing that always amazed him was that there was little difference between a shady inn in Pentos and a shady inn in Oldtown. The people looked different, but similar. Instead of a strangely spiced hot wine, they were drinking watery ale. But the looks they gave the newcomers were the same, they were the same in every inn from Oldtown to Norvos. They were only tolerated here But these men looked at least marginally better than the ones Lucas saw outside. An older man limped

forwards, scrutinizing them, looking with a hard face at Lucas and Leonard. To his relief, Lucas noticed that the man gave Lunett a look slightly softer than expected and not even half as lecherous as feared.

"What do you want?", he asked with a high and husky voice. Leonard stepped forwards, putting his best smile on. "Three rooms for the night, a bowl of your soup and two jugs of your best ale", he said, which put a sleazy smile onto the face of the old man. "There is only one ale and it tastes like the piss it is brewed from. Can you pay?"

Leonard opened his purse pulling out two silver coins. "These should be enough for as long as we intend to stay", he said and the old man gave him a nod, accompanied by a greedy grin. "This should be enough, aye", he answered, snatching the coins out of Leonards hand. For this amount of money he even managed to give Lunett a polite smile. "M'lady, M'lords, let me show you your rooms", he said, making a short handwave. Leonard shook his head. "I'll stay downstairs and secure us a table", he explained to Lucas and looked at the old man. "The bowl is for the girl. Bring it to her room", he demanded. Lunett gave him a surprised look, but said nothing.

The rooms the old man showed them weren't exactly in good condition, but they were warm and Lucas didn't saw any rats. This was a major improvement over the Tapping Pony in Raylansfair. Lunett's room was even better and the girl's face finally brightened up a bit. She turned around to Lucas after looking through her room. "I know I did a mistake", she said. "But you were kind to me and I won't forget it" She gave him a smile, before suddenly hugging him. "Thank you. For everything" Lucas was too surprised to answer at first, but couldn't contain a short smile. Maybe it wasn't too bad that they brought Lunett along. Yes, she lied to them, but if they would find Dairon, it wouldn't be too bad. Lucas had done mistakes too, he couldn't hold it against her. And he knew how being fed up with a place felt, how strong the desire to see distant lands could get.

As Lucas walked downstairs to the taproom, he saw that Leonard managed to get a small table next to a stained window. Two jugs of ale were standing in front of him and he gave him a short smile, to which Lucas only raised an eyebrow. He never thought that Leonard would be a man who would actually enjoy a tavern like this. "Come on Flowers, we need to talk", the knight said and grabbed his jug of ale. After taking a deep sip he made a disgusted face. "Tastes like piss. I never thought I would ever miss Raylansfair's shitty beer", he moaned.

Lucas gave him a short chuckle, before tasting the ale himself. Seven Hells, this was bad! "So, Flowers. What shall we do about Lunett?", Leonard asked. Lucas put down his jug and thought about it for a moment. Lunett had a kind heart. She did a mistake, but he was strangely fond of her. "I think you were too hard on her", Lucas answered and to his surprise Leonard gave him a nod. "You might be right...", he sighed. "But I have been lied to far too often. I really thought I could trust her and in this moment... I don't know. I just got angry at her" He paused for a short moment and looked out of the window. It was dark outside, but Lucas saw a large number of people walking across the street. "I paid the innkeeper double to keep an eye on her, to keep her safe while we're not looking. We can't take her with us to the Citadel tomorrow, that's for sure. After we found Dairon we will bring her back to her father and hope that he doesn't bash our heads in", Leonard decided and Lucas could only agree with him.

"One more thing, Flowers... Given that we actually find Dairon and Lord Raylan's last will, what do you intend to do with them?", Leonard asked and the question caught Lucas not

entirely off guard. He had thought about this, ever since he found Lord Raylan's last will in Harris' chambers. "Lord Raylan wanted to give Raylansfair to Manfred Hightower", Lucas started to say, but Leonard cut him off. "I know. But do you think this is for the best? Hightower isn't exactly a friend of Raylansfair. Maybe we should consider destroying the will and bringing the boy back to Harris. He has his flaws, but you can't deny that he will always do what is best for Raylansfair", the knight explained and Lucas wanted to protest. But then he thought... He was loyal to Lord Raylan, yes, but he was also loyal to Raylansfair. Hightower would take away the archive, maybe he would even put horrendous taxes on the smallfolk, just to prove his point. The lord of Oldtown never liked Raylansfair. Harris on the other hand was born there and lived there for all his life. "Maybe we could bring both to Highgarden. Show the last will to King Gardener", he said and Leonard shrugged. "Mern Gardener? I doubt he would even listen to us. Besides, what will you do if he decides in favour of Hightower here?", he spoke.

Lucas avoided looking Leonard in the eyes. Manfred Hightower wouldn't be good for Raylansfair, that was sure. But he was the man Lord Raylan wanted as his successor. Lucas had to decide where his loyalty truly lay. Lord Raylan, or Raylansfair? And what about Leonard? The knight clearly favoured Harris here and Lucas slightly agreed with him. Harris would be in a position where he could influence the choice of a successor. He was a lowborn bastard without any chance of becoming lord himself, but he could prevent Hightower from taking the Fair. But what would he do to Dairon? Harris was a just man, but he needed to present a murderer. Maybe he wasn't above using Dairon as a pawn here. The boy would be safe with Hightower and the king, that was certain. "I'm following your lead here, Lucas. But I'd like to clarify what we're going to do with Dairon and the will once we have him", Leonard said, expecting an answer.

### **[Bring Dairon and the will to the king]**

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#### **Marak**

Okay... he had to make a good first impression. Marak knew, the undeniable charisma he had when dealing with women didn't apply to men. Maybe they were envious of him, he had never found out. But it was worth a try. After all he only wanted to befriend this knight, not fuck him!

Marak gave the man his most charming smile. "Ser Darren Tallwood", he exclaimed. "I somehow heard that name before. Where are you from?", he asked. Ser Darren narrowed his eyes. "Raylansfair", he hissed. "And I doubt you've ever heard about me before. You're too young for that. What do you want?" Ah, he asked a question! In countless conversations, Marak had found out that this was usually a good sign. "I didn't expect a knight here. I respect fellow warriors and was interested in what a knight might be doing here", he explained. Ser Darren gave him a glare. "Liar...", he said softly and for a moment Marak looked genuinely surprised. How could he...? Marak always thought that he was a good liar. Sure, he was born to fight, not to deceive, but nonetheless he always thought that he had talent for that. What gave him away?

Ser Darren noticed his face and sighed. "I saw you with the Lady in Red. Have you seriously thought you wouldn't draw attention with a companion like this? Who is she?", he asked and Marak's smile returned. "Ah, you are interested in the noble Noelle of Braavos, the exotic flower of the east, right? Maybe I can make an introduction", he explained, noticing that the

man's face got considerably colder. "I'm not interested in a whore", he spat. "Besides, you haven't told me the truth"

Again? Seriously? Marak could only give him a surprised glance and this time Ser Darren's mouth formed a slight smile. "Your face gives you away. Even a child could catch you lying. It's really not that hard when you know where to look", he said before the smile was gone again. "Last chance. What do you want?", he asked.

Marak gulped. He never met a man before who could see through his lies and lived long enough to annoy him with that. But Noelle had been clear with his wishes. He should befriend this knight. Maybe Ser Darren liked the truth. "Well... this lady is Noelle Mield, a priestess of the Rollmop of Light", he started to explain and Ser Darren gave him a curious look. "I met her in Blackhaven in the Stormlands and she hired me to escort her to the city of Raylansfair"

"Raylansfair?", Ser Darren exclaimed. "What does a priestess want there?", he asked. Marak shrugged. "Something with your archive", he answered. Well, that was at least half of the truth. "Something with some chosen one. I really don't listen to her too much, it's not good for my mental health" This time he was completely honest. Ser Darren seemed pleased with this. "I am a knight in Lord Robert Raylan's service. He knighted me after the battle of the Grassy Vale, where we crushed the forces of the Storm King. I served him for a decade as a bodyguard and was quite happy with this. No attempt on the lord's life could ever have any chance of success with me guarding him", he started to explain, finally offering Marak the chair in front of him. The mercenary sat down, absolutely satisfied. He had done it again! "I was married to a local woman. We had two beautiful daughters", Ser Darren said and his face got sullen. Marak felt the need to say something, maybe something consoling. By the Drowned God, he was bad at consoling people! Luckily, Ser Darren continued before he could say something. "They were murdered, a year ago. I caught the killer, just as he was finished murdering my youngest daughter", he explained and Marak noticed a tear in the knight's eyes. This caused him to lose every ounce of respect he had for the man. Sure, it sounded horrible. But true men never cried! Marak hadn't cried in all his life

"I fought against the killer, but he was better than me. I never found out who he was, but it was clear that it was a message. So I chased the killer down. I chased him through the Reach, to Oldtown, where I lost his trail for a few weeks. I chased him through the Stormlands, to Blackwater Bay", he explained and Marak was slightly impressed. There was a lot of determination needed for a man to chase someone else across two kingdoms.

"Something happened there, some sort of fight and I was too late to intervene. And I found out that the killer had friends. I saw them. A one-eyed man with long brown hair, accompanied by two women with black hair. One of the women had burn scars over her arm, I think she was heavily wounded. And I think one of them was the killer, likely the man. I thought about ambushing them, but I lost track of them in the rough landscape of Blackwater Bay", Ser Darren continued and looked genuinely sorrowful "And that was where I understood. I was never the intended target of the killer. He only meant to lure me away from Lord Raylan", the knight said. "As fast as I could I travelled back to Raylansfair. Somewhere near Storm's End, I lost my horse and continued the way on foot. It took me weeks to even get here. And just as I came here, I found out that Lord Raylan is dead"

This time it was clear that the man was sad. Marak raised his hand in an attempt to pat the knight's back, as Ser Darren raised his head. "Don't. Even. Think. Of it.", he hissed and Marak slowly lowered his hand again. The knight sighed. "I don't even know why I'm telling

all of that to you. Maybe I'm tired of being silent", he said. Marak didn't know it either. The knight surely didn't seem to talkative to him, but still told him his story. Must have been the result of his charm! Marak suppressed a happy grin. This was not the right time to do that! "Listen, Marak, I want to meet with this Lady Noelle. You're going to bring me to her, now", he ordered and something in his voice reminded Marak of the way Noelle gave him orders. Without hesitating, Marak stood up. "It will be my pleasure, Ser Darren", he said and the knight stood up too. Together, the two made their way through the taproom, evading drunken people and disgusting scum from the Reach, before going upstairs, where Noelle had her room.

Marak felt Ser Darren's hand on his shoulder. "I have one question, Marak. Do you have any loyalty to this woman besides the fact that she pays you?", he asked. Marak was a bit surprised by this question, but shook his head. No, he had no loyalty to her. She was a crazy witch and he was... well, not afraid of her, of course not, but he was wary around her. There was nothing weak with being wary around a crazy witch! "Good...", Ser Darren sighed. "I don't know why the priestess is interested in Raylansfair, but I want to find it out", he said before giving Marak a hard glare. "But I will be careful around her. And you will tell me something. Is she dangerous?", he asked. Marak raised an eyebrow. Is she dangerous? Who asked a question like this, especially towards a mercenary? But... was she dangerous? That was indeed an interesting question. She saw things in the fire, she was always warm, she was from Asshai, she openly talked about spells and other things honest people shouldn't even think about! She was definitely crazy, but was she dangerous? And should he warn Ser Darren about her?

**[Tell Ser Darren that Noelle is crazy, but harmless]**

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### **Willfred**

"Are you ready boy?", Crakehall asked, lowering the visor of his helmet, shaped like stylized boar with small tusks at the lower side of his visor. "This will be something entirely different than the small fights you're used too. Your enemy knows no honour, will follow no rules. When it comes to battle, all he will think off is killing the man in front of him before getting killed himself. Do you understand that?"

Willfred gave him a slightly annoyed look. This wasn't his first fight! He scored third in the tourney Lannisport two years ago and fourth in the tourney of Ashemark last year. "Of course I do, Lord Crakehall. And I am not a boy", he answered. The old lord let out a loud laugh. "Oh yes, boy, you are. Trust me, this is different than the stuff you and your knightly friends played in the tournaments. As far as I have heard you have never fought against the Ironborn before, right?", he chuckled and before Willfred could give him an answer, he continued. "Of course not. Your father does not like the war. He's even more cautious than Tallian. Never gave you a taste for blood. But still, I can see something in your eyes. You are different than him. You have potential. You can be a true warrior"

Again, Willfred was impressed with the vitality Lord Crakehall expressed when about to go into the battle. Of course, General Tallian had advised caution and had been furious when Willfred expressed his wish to fight at the frontlines. But Tallian was a craven, someone who rather stayed behind the lines, someone who would rather sacrifice a hundred men to keep himself safe than fighting someone directly. Crakehall was different. His father would say that Crakehall was no true lord, that a lord can't risk to die with his men, simply because of his



importance. But his father was wrong. A true lord was a warrior. The kings of the First Men had been great warriors and they ruled Westeros for thousands of years until the Andals came. Even the Andal kings had been warriors at first. And the Rhoynar, who landed in Dorne a thousand years ago even had women fighting for them. A true leader must also be a true warrior, Willfred knew this.

"I am ready, Lord Crakehall. I will fight them and I will kill them", Willfred exclaimed.

Crakehall gave him a grim nod. "I'm sure you will do good. All these games you have been fighting in must have been good for something, right?", he shouted before turning his horse around, facing his army. Willfred had left his own men behind to guard General Tallian, mainly because the General had insisted on it. Still, almost two hundred men under the banner of Crakehall, a black and white boar on a brown field, stood in front of him.

Crakehall's men were among the best trained in the whole kingdom, mainly because the old lord never wasted an opportunity to aid the Rock in the war. And it slightly peeved Willfred that even the lowest soldier in this army had more experience than he had.

"Soldiers! Warriors! Brothers!", Crakehall shouted, pointing his axe at the valley below.

"These men down there aren't conscripted fishfuckers from the Riverlands. These are killers and they call themselves Ironborn. But that doesn't mean shit! They say they are true iron. They say their god commands them to..." His voice got harder for a moment as he narrowed his eyes. "To rape our women, to pillage our villages, to burn our fields! Here is what I say to these sons of a whore, these cowards who would rather slaughter children than to fight against one of you" With these words, Crakehall spat on the ground and his soldiers started to cheer.

"I know most of you. I fought with you in countless battles. A single one of you is worth ten so-called Ironborn! If they are hard, you are harder! If they are the iron, you are the rock! Show them what happens when iron hits a rock! Show them their god, when they drown in their blood! Show them that there are none so fierce as you!", he screamed and his men started to shout. "None so fierce! None so fierce! Crakehall! Crakehall for the Rock!", they screamed and Willfred had to chime in. "For the Rock!", Lord Crakehall shouted, turning his horse towards the enemy force. "For the Rock!", he screamed again and started to ride down.

His cavalry followed close by and Willfred had to run his horse to keep up with him.

Crakehall's infantry was separated into two battalions with the task to flank the Ironborn. The enemy forces had already been depleted by Crakehall's scouts, who pushed them into a small basin. Right now, the scouts were somewhere behind the Ironborn, waiting to shoot at anyone who tried to flee the battlefield. Of course, Tallian had advised against using the cavalry in a frontal attack. But Tallian was a coward. Crakehall betted on a single, lethal attack with forty men on horses to crush the Ironborn. His infantry would do the rest. Against an equal force, this would likely be a foolish move. But Willfred understood that the Ironborn had been hounded for the past two days. From over a hundred men, over thirty found their death at the hands of the scouts. They were tired and demotivated and they had to fight against cavalry. Even worse, they had to fight against cavalry lead by Quentyn Crakehall. Willfred felt an excitement in him that he never felt before, not in Lannisport and not in Ashemark.

The first attack was befitting to the reputation the old lord had. Crakehall was the first in battle and his axe hit one of the Ironborn heavy enough to send part of the man's head flying, while his horse crushed two more. Willfred rode to his right, slightly behind him,

swinging his sword at the first Ironborn in range. The man wore a helmet but the sheer force of Willfred's strike was enough to knock him to the ground, where he was quickly trampled by the attacking horses. A second man tried to jump backwards, out of the reach of Willfred's sword, but merely bumped into the man behind him, unable to get away far enough to evade the strike. Willfred hit him at the throat, sending the man to the ground, gurgling for air. Crakehall's plan worked indeed. Willfred saw the Ironborn retreating, trying to flee either to the sides or running in the opposite direction of the cavalry, where the scouts greeted them with arrows. The Ironborn at the sides quickly found themselves in a melee against the infantry. They hadn't even managed to hold their line a single minute against the cavalry. Still, Willfred was impressed with the ferocity the Ironborn expressed. They tried to run, yes, but they also refused to give up. The ones fighting against the infantry would have had a good chance if they weren't outnumbered two to one. They had even managed to bring down a few horsemen. Yet it was an easy victory, all things considered. Willfred landed a heavy blow against an attacking Ironborn, splitting the man's face in half. He was impressed with the quick victory, but he would have wished a real battle, like one of the battles Two-Face told him about. The Ironborn had so much potential as his enemies. Brutal melees, bloody duels, yes that would be...

A sudden jolt went through his body as Willfred felt his horse caving in under him. The world started to spin as Willfred fell down heavily, barely managing to evade getting crushed by the horses behind him, hitting the ground violently. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a small throwing axe stuck in his horse's head, an axe that was likely aimed at Crakehall originally. Willfred tried to get on his feet, doing his best to ignore the terrible weight of his armour. This was indeed something he was prepared for. It wasn't easy to get back on his feet after a fall like this, even without the armour, but he had done it plenty of times in the tournaments. Willfred got his hands on his side, slowly pushing himself up again, managing to raise his knees. In that moment, he felt a heavy blow on his back and a sharp pain flashing through his spine as he hit the ground again. The pain in his back was almost unbearable, but to his relief he was able to move his feet. As he raised his head, he saw a man holding an axe in his hand, slowly raising the axe. He tried to get to his feet, but the sharp pain in his back made him fall down again. No! No, he shouldn't die here, it was only supposed to be a small skirmish, they had already won, he couldn't die here, not now, not before he finished his mission. He thought of Alanna, of Tynen, of his mother, of his father. His father would be disappointed. He thought of Lorna. Maybe King Loren would be happy that he would be able to marry his daughter to another kingdom after all.

Suddenly a lance hit his opponent in the chest. The man got to his knees, the axe falling down, only a few inches away from Willfred's face. He saw shock in the man's face, pain, as the man fell down, gurgling, drowning in his blood. It did not look as if he saw his god in his last moments. Strong hands pulled Willfred up, causing him to cry in pain as he was forced to put weight on his back. "Can you move your legs, boy?", he heard Crakehall's voice. Willfred gave him a short nod. "Good. Would have been terrible if Reyne's heir would gotten crippled in a battle like this" Crakehall moved his horse into Willfred's field of view. The old lord had a small cut on his upper arm, but seemed to be cheerful and enthusiastic. "What a battle! Hah, you saw them run, boy?", he chuckled making a handwave over the battlefield. There were a few duels still fought and Willfred saw a few of Crakehall's men lying dead on the field. But for every dead man of the rock, two Ironborn lay dead on the field.

It turned out that not all of the Ironborn had tried to run away and not all of them had tried to go down fighting. A handful of them had actually dropped their weapons. Some of them were gruesomely wounded, unable to continue the fight, others were just scared, having dropped their weapons. To Willfred's surprise, some of them seemed to be close to tears. He would have expected dirty, brutal monsters from what his father told him. But on the ground, cornered by Crakehall's soldiers lay simple and scared men. Some of them looked a bit rugged, different from what Willfred was used to from the generally pleasant looking people of the Rock. Others looked a bit closer to the Ironborn of his father's stories, these murdering, rampaging beasts. Still, in the stories it was told that the sight of their sails instilled fear in the people of the western coast for thousands of years. Willfred wasn't afraid of these men. He pitied them. They were pawns, used by a cruel king, used for his sick ambitions, they were sent to slaughter for things they never believed in, weren't they? The things the Ironborn did in the backroom of the small house they had stormed a few days ago came into mind. He remembered what the scout had said. The women had it worse... It was hard to believe that these crying men, some of them not older than Willfred would be able to do something like this, something that was able to put Quentyn Crakehall off. These men were pawns, but Willfred wasn't so sure anymore if that would be enough to redeem them in the eyes of the Seven.

Out of the corner of his eye, Willfred saw Vashord Tallian approaching, accompanied by his father's men. The general had watched the fight from afar and in this moment Willfred was appalled by him. A true general had to be like Crakehall. Brave. Strong. An able fighter. As far as Willfred knew, Tallian had never won any tournament. He was a knight, of course, but he only fought in some tent, he fought his battles with a map and his mind. There was no honour in this.

"You're alright, Willfred?", Tallian asked and Willfred gave him a nod. His back was killing him, but he wouldn't let the general know. He wouldn't appear weak in front of him, he was strong and he fought brave! Tallian slightly smiled, clearly unconvinced. "Next time we should make things my way. I see a few of Crakehall's men lying dead here. Needless deaths", he hissed and Crakehall gave him a glare. "Glorious deaths", the old lord insisted. "They knew the risk. They died as the rock that dulled the iron" Tallian's smile vanished, replaced by a frown. "There is no bigger lie than the 'glorious death', Lord Crakehall. Every death is pathetic. In his moment of dying, a man has no dignity, no grace, no honour, no glory. I thought an old soldier would know that"

Crakehall started to laugh, a rough and brittle sound. "You are pathetic, Tallian. You talk a big game, but you know nothing", he hissed. Tallian similarly glared at him. "Pathetic? Pathetic! I led the Rock to victory countless times. I don't charge head first into a battle, I don't have to", he growled. Crakehall shook his head. "You are pathetic. You are a craven and your cowardice disgusts me. Look at my men. They love me and they would follow me to the Seven Hells and back. How many men would follow you, Vashord Tallian?", he asked and spat on the ground. For a short moment, the lord of Crakehall and the General looked at each other. "No man calls me pathetic, Lord Crakehall..." Tallian said and his voice was dangerously calm. Willfred noticed that he had his hands on the hilt of his sword. It was an elegant sword, similar to Willfred's own. But unlike his own sword, Tallian's weapon never had any blood on it. Crakehall let out a loud, roaring laugh. "Sure, Tallian. Go ahead, attack me. I am half your size and twice your age. Attack me and I will show you how wrong you are when you mock the deaths of my men", he growled. Tallian looked him straight in the eye

and simply put his hands away from his sword. This led to Crakehall laughing even harder. "Like I said... craven", he hissed.

With these words, he stepped aside, giving Willfred a slight nod. "It's been a long day and Tallian doesn't make it any better", he said before looking at the captured Ironborn. "I would send their heads back to Harrenhal. But I'm sure Tallian has something to say against this and I am in no mood to argue with him today. Willfred, I leave the fate of these men in your hands. Kill them, torture them, imprison them, set them free. Your choice. And now excuse me while I go and find some ale to drink!", he explained and started to walk away.

Tallian looked after him, his face filled with disdain. "Look at this man, Willfred", he said.

"Look at this old, stubborn fool, but never look up to him. Don't you ever become like him"

Willfred gave Tallian an angry look. "Lord Crakehall is a brave man. He led us to victory today, he fought valiantly and with honour", he exclaimed.

"Honour? You haven't listened to me, Willfred. Honour does not matter on the battlefield.

Dead men have no honour and bravery gets you killed. I don't question Crakehall's honour. I don't question his ability to fight bravely, I question his ability to lead. He is a lord and shouldn't behave like a common soldier. His life is too valuable. Your life is too valuable. My own life is too valuable", he explained and Willfred gave him an angry look. Pathetic! "One day you will be the northern rock's most powerful lord. The lion of Reyne bows only to the lion of Lannister. Crakehall slaughtered at least a dozen men today. True to his house's words, there is none so fierce as him. But if he dies, who would have led the men? Any soldier can get to the point where he can kill a dozen men. With the right training and a bit of luck, everyone can do this. But leading? Commanding an army? Show me one common soldier who can do this", Tallian explained. "I understood this. If you want to be a good lord, you need to understand this too. At the end of the day, there are two things that matter. First, surviving, so that you can continue the fight. Second, victory, so that your enemies fear you. They don't fear a brave dead man, they fear an undefeated man" He looked at the captured Ironborn and gave Willfred a handwave, commanding him to follow. "And trust me, you want these men to fear you"

The Ironborn looked at Willfred, some with hatred, most of them with fear. Almost a dozen of them had survived the battle with wounds that weren't severe enough to kill them.

Crakehall's men had dealt with those who would have died either way. Tallian looked at the captives with a cold look on his face. "Trust me", he said again. "You want these men to fear you, for they will never respect you. They are Ironborn. Fear is the only concept they understand"

Right now, fear seemed to be the only emotion they had. One of the Ironborn even started to plead under tears. "Please. Please mylord. Mercy!", he whined. "I never wanted to do this. Harren Hoare would have killed my family if I refused to fight for him, he...." The Ironborn was interrupted by Tallian's plated boot hitting him in the face. He dropped to the ground, spitting blood and teeth. "That is pathetic!", Tallian hissed. "Harren Hoare would have killed your family? Well, for what I know, maybe he would have done that indeed. Or maybe he would have killed them for looking at him the wrong way. He commanded you to fight? I believe he has. But has he ever commanded you to rape our women? Has he ever commanded anyone of you to slaughter our children?" His voice got an angry tone as he grabbed one of the Ironborn at the shoulders. The captive was an older man with a scarred face and obviously one of the braver ones. He didn't look at Tallian with fear. He was furious and his eyes were full of hatred. "No", he answered. "He never commanded us to do it. But

we did it regardless. Every single one of us raped your women and killed your screaming whelps before murdering them with our bare hands. And, what can I say, your women had been the worst whores any of us ever had. They were dull as a rock”

Some of the Ironborn were cheering at the man who had spoken. Others started to whine, pleading for mercy, claiming that they had never did any of these things, that it had been the rest, but that they were as innocent as a soldier could be. Tallian looked at Willfred. “You see now, boy? They need to fear you”, he said. Willfred didn't answer. He had to deal with these men. He had to send them to their deaths. Some of them were monsters, but monster or not, this was something else than killing them on the battlefield. He looked at Tallian for help and the general sighed. “Crakehall was wrong when he said I would disagree with him. These bastards should be sent back to Harrenhal, but not just their heads. I say we torture them. Ironborn aren't afraid of a few heads. But if we cut off their dicks and a few other parts and send them back to Harrenhal in shame... Now that would send a message, that would give them something to fear. Fear is the only language they speak”, he suggested. Indeed, as he spoke some of the Ironborn gave him startled looks.

Willfred closed his eyes. He hated torture. He wasn't a monster like Harren Hoare. He was Willfred Reyne and he was a knight, a good man. Though maybe this time it was the right thing to listen to the general. On the other hand, these men were prisoners of war. Ironborn or not, it wasn't knightly to treat them bad, to torture and mutilate them, no matter the reason behind it. He could simply order to imprison them at Crakehall, maybe trading them for prisoners from the Rock. A true knight would do this. Or he could follow Crakehall's wish. A quick death, still better than these men deserved.

**[Give them a quick death and send their heads back to Harrenhal]**

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## **Maya**

“Aren't you pretty?”, Lord Brune giggled. “Perhaps I should thank the Bronze Lord for sending me such a delightful gift. Wolf, after I'm done with the Ambassador, you will write a letter for me, understood?” Maya didn't look at Ser Aldrik. What kind of knight would just stand there and watch while his lord acted like this? As fast as she dared, Maya reached for her second dagger. She only needed to wait for the right moment.

“Write him my sincerest thanks. Write him that he can consider us *even* now”, Brune said with a lecherous smile and pulled Maya closer to him. “He never told you, right?”, he asked and Maya gave him a look of feigned curiosity. Just a bit longer. She only had one try. She had to convince him that she was little more than a scared little girl. The first part wasn't hard. She was scared. But she was not a little girl. She was not helpless. She had a dagger and she was angry.

“Told me what?”, she stuttered, giving him a frightened glare. Brune looked her straight in the eye and grinned. “He never did... Of course he never did. His Bronze Lordship can be quite charming if he wants to, you know that, right?”, he answered and his smile vanished. “She was all I had left. My sons shun me, my wife preferred dying! She was all I had left... and he defiled her. She told me it wasn't rape, but she was always a bit slow in the brain” He stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. Maya used this moment to grab her dagger.

“Who would marry her after Royce had her? No lord with dignity, that's for sure. So I had to give her to Crabb, an old petty lord who even has to sell his own belongings to stay alive...”, Brune hissed, opening his eyes again. His smile returned. “I waited for an opportunity to

repay my debt for ten fucking years. You're not his daughter... but I say you'll suffice", he said grabbing her shoulders and looking her deep in the eyes. "You won't resist, or else I'm going to hurt your friends and I'm going to hurt you even more..." With these words he pulled her close, slightly lifting her in the air and slamming her onto the table next to him. She felt his hand on her breasts, trying to open her shirt, felt his breath on her face, felt the fear in her heart, felt the anger inside of her, felt the cold hilt of her dagger in her right hand and she made a movement...

She saw the surprised reaction on his face as lust turned to pain. With all her strength she managed to push him off of her. With a squishing sound the dagger moved out of his belly as Lord Brune fell to the ground, gasping heavily, his eyes filled with fear. "No... no... please, I...", he said as Maya jumped on top of him. Maybe it would have been wiser to spare him, to take him hostage. She didn't care. She didn't care about Ser Aldrik, she didn't even pay attention to him. Brune had to die!

"He told me you were unarmed!", Brune whined. These were his last words as Maya drove the dagger deep into his throat and his words turned to an unintelligible gurgling. *Once, Twice, Thrice, Again and Again, until the last sign of life had left his brown eyes.*

Trymon Brune, Lord of the Dyre Den, was dead.

Tears were flowing down Maya's face as she jumped up in a single movement, holding the dagger like a shield in front of her, facing Ser Aldrik Wolver. The mercenary knight hadn't moved, he hadn't even lay a hand at the hilt of his sword. Instead he had his arms crossed and raised an eyebrow. He raised an eyebrow! He looked at her and didn't even seem to be angry. If anything, Ser Aldrik seemed... pleased? A terrible thought crossed Maya's mind.

"Are you done?", Wolver asked. "Surely you can't mean to attack me. That would be the height of foolishness" Maya shivered as she heard these words. No! No! That couldn't be... She did not want to believe this! "What are you going to do now?", she hissed, noticing how her voice sounded meek, now unintentionally. She fell down to her knees, sobbing, looking at the bloody dagger in her hand. She had killed him. He deserved it, but... but why was Ser Aldrik so pleased?

She saw him approaching and raised her dagger. Ser Aldrik's face softened up. "Please, put down your dagger and we talk about what just happened", he said and she dropped the dagger out of her shivering hands. Ser Aldrik pulled her up and gave her a soft hug. It was meant as a gesture of kindness, but Maya didn't want a gesture of kindness now. She wanted to stab someone, a certain someone, a bronze bastard with eyes as pale as a nightmare and a smile as spine-chilling as the sound of a knife in the dark.

Ser Aldrik gave her a kind smile. "Brune wouldn't have done it. He tried to scare you. He would have hurt you, but he was no rapist. He wasn't evil, he was just a man who was left alone in his bitterness for years. And even if he would have tried to go through with it, I would have been honour-bound to intervene", he reassured her, kindly pushing her towards a chair. And then he said something horrible, something Maya already knew. "You were brave today, Maya. And you did the Bronze Lord a favour. He will be pleased"

Despite the fact that she had known it the moment she saw his relaxed expression, she gave him a look of pure shock. "How long...?", she whispered. Aldrik sighed. "Five years. You see, Lord Brune was one of Crackclaw Point's most powerful lords. And he was allied with Lord Crabb. Together they could have closed the Bay of Crabs on the Storm King's call, leading the Vale to starve through the winter", he explained. Maya's expression of shock got the new

layer of pure disbelief. "Royce couldn't have planned all of this...", she whispered, noticing that she was still shivering.

"I don't know Lord Royce very well. I receive regular payment from him, but that's it. But if I know one thing about him, than it is that he is a master when it comes to improvising. It was planned that I shall dispose of Brune personally if the man ever becomes a problem. But a few days ago a raven arrived. It brought a letter to Lord Brune and a second letter, detailing new orders for me. So I reminded Brune of what Royce did. I reminded him of vengeance", he explained and Maya's expression turned to rage as she clenched her fist. "You... you would have let him rape me?", she hissed and Ser Aldrik shook his head. "No! I am a man of honour. Nothing would have happened to you. However, I knew you were armed. There was a reason Royce gave you two daggers. They aren't that useful in a real fight, right?", he explained.

Maya looked at him, looked at the dead Lord Brune. She could still feel the lord's stinking breath on her face. And with a single, quick movement she slammed her fist into Wolver's face. She caught him off guard, hearing a satisfying crunch, felt the blood on her hand as he fell back, holding his nose. "Fuck...", he muttered. "I deserved that" But he gave her a grin and Maya took a last look at Lord Brune. Royce had used her, used her in the most despicable way possible, used her to do his dirty work, used her to kill one of his rivals. He had played them all. She was a pawn. Wolver was a pawn. And Lord Brune had been a pawn too. Maya couldn't help, she had to start laughing at the situation.

Wolver got up again. Blood was flowing out of his nose, but he didn't seem to be angry. "I am sorry, Maya. The Bronze Lord told me that you were a wonderful woman and that he is sorry too", he said and Maya gave him a desperate grin. "He isn't sorry", she insisted. Wolver looked at the door of the great Hall. "Lord Brune gave orders that nobody should disturb him, so I don't think anyone will discover him for a few hours. I will escort you and your men out of Brune's land now and make safe that nobody follows you, if it pleases you" It pleased her. As strange as it seems, it pleased her. She had been used, but she couldn't even hate Lord Royce for it.

---

Wolver was true to his word and a few minutes later Maya, Gregar and Irving walked down the path that lead them away from the Dyre Den. Gregar was silent, but glared at Wolver, who accompanied them. Irving on the other hand was in a good mood. Getting released from the prison did wonders to him, albeit he was still complaining. Maya knew, he was always complaining

"The prison in Dyre Den is terrible. I saw a rat as big as my head! Damn the Bronze Lord for sending me with you", he moaned and Gregar gave him a glare. "How about you thank Maya for getting us out of there?", he hissed. Irving rolled with his eyes. "Yeah, sure. Thank you Maya, thank you for getting us out of the prison you got us into the first place", he answered. Maya gave him a bright smile. "You are very welcome, Irving", she grinned. This caught Irving slightly off guard and he was silent for a moment. But it didn't took him long to find something to complain about. "Ser Aldrik, your wolf growled at me", he said. It was a weak complain and Maya had the feeling that Irving was a bit shaken by the whole situation. And she also had the slight feeling that he was indeed glad to be out of the prison again, even though it was dry and warmer than outside.

Ser Aldrik didn't even bother to react. Irving gave him a grimace. "Sure, ignore me, why not? Why don't you all just ignore me, like always? But if your wolf eats me, it's your fault", he

said. Aldrik slightly rolled his eyes. "Maya, there is one thing I want to request. I feel horrible for playing my part in tricking you and Lord Brune. Lord Royce wrote in his letter that he leaves it up to you, so I'm asking... I want to accompany you and your companions to Raylansfair", he said and Maya gave him a surprised look. Taking him with them? He was working for Royce! Just like her, just like Irving. He used her. He was being used, just like her. He was a knight, he had a wolf with him, he was a better fighter than anyone from her group. And he seemed genuinely sorry. "If you don't want my company, I can understand. I will return to Runestone in that case"

**[Allow him to accompany you to Raylansfair]**

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### **Ellena**

She looked at the knife in front of her. Moreo's knife. He had told her that it was a family heirloom, from a famous ancestor who had been a pirate king at the Stepstone Islands. He had been her friend.

"I'm waiting for your answer. Don't make this any worse than it already is, girl", Harrington said. "Eh, Samuel, she isn't answering. Maybe she'll tell Butterfly once he uses a knife on her fingers", Jaylon said with an annoyed tone. Harrington gave him a cold glare. "Girl, we don't want this any more than you do. At least I don't want to bring you to Butterfly", he answered. Jaylon cleared his throat. "Don't exclude me here. You think I like to watch when he does these... things? Come on girl, tell him and we can all go home", he insisted, not paying attention to her for a moment. This was his mistake. Ellena had never been strong, but she had been fast. Her father had taught her how to use a spear, but a knife was nothing else than a very short spear, right? She grabbed the knife, jumped to her feet, ignoring the terribly dizzy feeling in her head and she plunged the knife deep into Jaylon's upper leg. The mercenary went to the ground screaming as blood poured out of his wound. In a single movement, Samuel Harrington drew his sword and took a hit at Ellena, but she already jumped out of his reach and into the corridor.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fucking fuck!", Jaylon screamed. "Fucking bitch fucking stabbed me! Fucking kill her!" Ellena saw Samuel approaching her, his stare cold as ice, while Jaylon tried to stand up again. The wound wouldn't kill him, most likely and to Ellena's dismay he wasn't even crippled by it. But he was bleeding. And right now Harrington was the more dangerous out of the two. Maybe not only right now. She started to run, Harrington behind her. He was fast, but he was wearing armour. She was faster.

Feeling her heart beating in her chest, Ellena started to run up the stairs that lead to the upper deck. She saw the light, she only needed to get to the other sailors. They weren't fighter, but some of them were very strong. And she doubted that Harrington could take all of them alone. All of a sudden, a man stepped into her line of sight and she bumped into him. She didn't recognize him, he wasn't one of the sailors. He wore armour, he had a short sword with him. And the look he gave her told her everything she needed to know. Samuel and Jaylon had a third man with them!

"Now who do we have here? Trying to run aw...", he said but was cut short as Ellena let out a cry of rage and moved the knife forwards. She wouldn't let them take her! And she wouldn't tell them about Terroma, not even if she had to fight against all of them! Death couldn't be as bad as what they would do to her. Death wasn't something bad, nobody in Braavos feared it. There was nothing to fear about it. She remembered the one thing the Bravos would say every morning, the only thing they said about death.



*Not today, not today, not today...*

*Not today!*

Her knife hit them man under his right armpit, went deep into his flesh and she saw the surprised look on his dying face. She didn't even bother with him and ran past him as she heard heavy footsteps behind her. Harrington took another blow and this time she felt the sword missing her by a hair. And then she was at the upper deck, her face and right hand stained with blood, with surprised sailors looking at her. But these sailors knew her. And they weren't stupid people. Behind her, Harrington stepped into their sight. And even behind him, Jaylon limped forwards, giving her a glare full of hatred. They faced two dozen sailors, who gave them cold frowns.

Harrington looked at the men for a moment and started to laugh. "You don't really think you are enough to take me, are you?", he asked mockingly before looking at Ellena. "You killed one of our men. Butterfly won't be displeased anymore, he will be boiling with anger. This is your last chance to tell us what we want to know. We will go and you have a chance to leave this city. Don't make this any worse. Whoever this Terroma is, he isn't worth dying for"

*He was wrong with this!*

She stood there, the knife in her hands, trying not to be afraid. Her hands were shaking, the pain in her head, where Samuel hit her, was almost unbearable. Some of the sailors had grabbed weapons, small hatchets and knives mostly. Harrington was looking at them with a cold glare. "Don't you think I will hesitate to cut you all down", he hissed before becoming silent again. Jaylon had his sword out as well, albeit he was in a bad shape. The glare he gave Ellena sent shivers down her spine. "Last chance", Harrington said. "Last chance or there will be a lot of death. Where is Terroma" Ellena gulped. She wasn't afraid, she wasn't afraid, she wasn't afraid, she was afraid, oh yes, she was afraid and she didn't want to die here...

"We're interested in this as well", a male voice with a Ghiscari accent called out. Ellena heard heavy steps and saw Harrington narrowing his eyes in anger. As she turned her head, she saw two men boarding the Pale Princess. They both had shaved heads, the dark skin of pure-blooded Ghiscari and black, wiry beards. They were both tall and muscular, albeit one of the men was clearly one of the tallest men Ellena had ever seen, with arms thick like tree trunks. She noticed a number of obscene tattoos on his arms and he gave her a big smile. The other man wasn't smiling, instead he was looking at Ellena and Harrington with a calculating stare. And both of them were armed. The taller man held a bearded axe firmly in his hands, while the other man hold two strangely curved swords, looking almost like sickles. Ellena had seen weapons like these before. The Dothraki used them for mounted combat. They called them *Arakh*.

Harrington spat on the ground. "Was only a matter of time before the cripple sends his men here", he growled. The man with the *Arakhs* made a mocking bow, presenting his swords and gave Harrington a short, cold smile. "Greetings", he said politely "My name is Abbas al-Yunkari. This is my business partner Bakr al-Astapori" Jaylon spat on the ground "Fucking Ghiscari. The cripple works with slavers now? That's a new low, even for him"

Abbas looked genuinely offended. "We are humble merchants", he insisted, but Ellena didn't believe him for a second. "And we're here to talk to the person who saved Ser Jaron's life a few days ago" He gave Harrington a chilling stare. "But I see the insect's *aspos* are already here", he hissed, his accented Westerosi mixing with the hard and guttural Ghiscari.

Technically, Ghiscari and Braavosi were the same language, a bastardized form of High

Valyrian. But Braavosi was an elegant and soft language, reminding Ellena of flowers. Ghiscari was a harsh and crude language, sounding threatening even when the speaker intended to sound friendly. Still, she had an idea what the man just said. And judging from Harrington's angry face he understood too. "Mind your tongue, foreign bastard", the mercenary growled.

The tall man, Bakr pointed his axe at Harrington. "Why don't you mind your tongue, before I cut it off?", he answered, his friendly smile not leaving his face. Harrington pointed his sword at him. "You think you're better than I am? Come closer and I will cut you down", he proclaimed, to which Bakr responded with a boisterous laugh. "Are you sure, *Vesterozi*?", he asked. "Are you so sure you can kill me and Abbas?" Harrington did not answer. Apparently he calculated his chances against these two and the sailors.

Abbas gave Ellena a cold look. "You want this girl, right?", he asked. Jaylon spat out. "Fuck you, slaver. This girl belongs to Butterfly", he answered. Bakr's smile vanished. "Belong? And they call us slavers. Stupid *Vesterozi*!", he growled and looked at Ellena. "Hello, little girl. My name is Bakr mo Azar al-Astapori. Me and my friend Abbas work for the Burned Man, who opposes the insect these two men work for", he said with a friendly voice. He sounded genuine. But Ellena had always been wary around Ghiscari.

"Little girl, it appears these men try to take you to the Butterfly", Abbas said, still looking Samuel in the eye, like one predator who was eyeing another. "We can't let that happen. If you know something about the Jaron incident, the Burned Man would like a word with you" Samuel chuckled. "Seriously? I've heard he has a special liking in children. Girl, we won't take you to Butterfly. The stuff he will do to you... Well, let's say we can prevent it. You're just telling us what we want to know, okay?", he said. Bakr took a step forward, trying to get between Ellena and Samuel. "You won't, Fang of Shadows, you won't. The Burned Man is not a rapist. He does not torture to get his results. Little girl, he can protect you from Butterfly and these *tyvaros*. Go with us and we throw them overboard for you"

Harrington shook his head. "Not needed. We know when a fight is lost. We're leaving, if the girl won't tell us what we want to know. But we will come back and it will be worse than anything you can imagine"

Ellena finally cleared her throat, causing Abbas and Samuel to look at her. "And if I don't want to go with any of you?", she asked. Bakr gave her a friendly smile. "We are no monsters, unlike these creatures here. We won't force you. And neither will they, I'll make sure of that. If you want, we leave, it's your choice. But going with us ensures the Burned Man's protection", he explained.

**[Go with Abbas and Bakr and meet the Burned Man]**

## **Kersea**

Wolfius looked at her with his unsettling smile getting wider and wider. He already seemed to know her answer. Kersea suppressed a sigh and forced herself to look him in the eyes. The look in them could be her own one day...

"Fine. I'll work with you", she answered and hated herself for it almost as much as she hated him or Clayton. Wolfius gave her an approving nod. "Good choice", he hissed and looked at Clayton. "I can do with her whatever I like?", he asked. Clayton gave him a nod and Kersea

noticed slight disgust in his face. This might be his only redeeming feature. Clayton was a professional and he hated people who killed for pleasure, especially for pleasures as sick as Wolfius'. "But she needs to die", he reminded him again.

Wolfius let out a growl. "Sure, Clayton. Don't talk to me like I'm stupid", he hissed, while looking at Kersea with a cold glare. She felt Clayton's hand on her shoulder and shivered.

"You are nervous, right?", he asked. She managed to nod. She didn't like this. Killing someone wasn't a problem for her. But the stuff Wolfius would do? If Jenna got lucky she would only get raped before the beast would cut her throat. But Kersea had a feeling that Wolfius wouldn't be in the mood for that. He was able to hide his emotions well, but Kersea saw that he was angry. In the horrible weeks since she met Wolfius, she had never seen him losing his temper. Sure, he was always angry, but it was a subtle anger, expressing itself in occasional glares that were so much worse than him shouting and screaming. But this time, Kersea felt that he was actually close to lash out at someone, like a rabid wolf.

Clayton gave her a soft look. "If you are nervous, think about your sister. This should calm you down", he said and seemed to be honestly worried about her. But Kersea knew better.

"Asshole...", she mumbled. Clayton did not answer or react to her in any way. Instead he looked at Wolfius. "Whatever is necessary. But nothing more", he said with a stern expression on his face. Wolfius gave him a nod. "Whatever I deem necessary", he smiled, but Clayton cut him off. "Whatever I deem necessary, you understand me?"

Wolfius shrugged, looking slightly bored. "Whatever you say, Clayton. Maybe I can have my way with blacksmith Mettel's daughter when we're done here", he said and yawned.

Clayton's stare was cold enough to freeze the Seven Hells. "When we're done completely. When we travel back to Oldtown and I don't have to care for you anymore. Try anything before I allow you to try it, and I'll cut you down myself", he hissed, his voice getting dangerously calm. Wolfius gave him a slight smile as a return.

"Sure, of course I am afraid of you. A man who feels the need to hide behind a fake name can be intimidating, am I right, *Ellyrio Terys*", he smiled and Kersea noticed a subtle change in Clayton's face. She remembered Terys. Another name, another regret, even though she never met him. He was simply a Braavosi merchant who had loose contacts to Raylansfair, a merchant who loved his daughter and who owned a warehouse in Raylansfair. Clayton took his life and his identity, just for this mission...

"Because Wolfius is your real name, right?", Clayton answered with a chilling smile. Wolfius smile vanished. "It might not be the name I was born with, but it is the name I am right now. You are not Ellyrio Terys and you will never be. You will always be Clayton Teryl, a killer who thinks he's better than me just because he kills for money", he said and turned around. "I'm going to the castle and I'm killing Jenna Harking. I'm not doing it for Butterfly and I'm certainly not doing it for you", he hissed. "I'm doing this because I want to" With these words, Wolfius left the building.

Clayton looked after him and then at Kersea. "Keep him under control, Kersea", he whispered. And how was she supposed to do that? Wolfius barely managed to keep himself under control. Ever since they arrived in Raylansfair, he had been a problem, a barely controllable beast. He hadn't tried to kill her or Alysanne yet, but Kersea knew he would love it. And he had killed a girl on the streets, simply because she reminded him of some barmaid. Clayton had been furious after finding it out, but Wolfius had just smiled and Kersea had never seen him calmer. But if there was one thing that Wolfius was good at, it was killing. She had seen him fight. He wasn't a trained fighter, such as Alysanne, he wasn't

naturally graceful, such as herself and he wasn't subtle like Clayton. He was brutal, with no regards for his own life, and absolutely ruthless. He would be useful, he could help her. And she hated herself for accepting his offer. All for her sister...

As Kersea stepped out of the building, she saw Wolfius standing in the shadows of the large warehouse in front of her. He watched her and smiled. Kersea noticed a large raven wheeling far over his head. "City guard is patrolling the streets. This dumb ox of a commander is commanding them personally", he explained and Kersea gave him a curious look. "How exactly do you know that?", she asked. Wolfius smile got a bit wider. "I have seen it", he hissed and Kersea was confused for a moment until she remembered that he was outside for a few hours, getting the damn dagger from the blacksmith he took a liking to. "Are they looking for you?", she asked. Wolfius gave her a slight nod. "Blacksmith Mettel told the city guard, of course she did", he hissed. "Clayton should have allowed me to kill that dumb whore. Well, later, I guess"

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They moved down the street in complete silence and Kersea was quite thankful for it. Wolfius wasn't exactly the person she wanted to talk to. In fact there was no person in this whole city she wanted to talk to. Maybe Jenna Harking. Kersea wanted to tell her that she was sorry for Richard. That she was sorry for everything, especially what she had to do. But she knew that she wouldn't talk to her. Should that happen, Kersea wasn't too sure if she would be able to kill her.

One time they had to stop as a large group of guardsmen emerged out of an alleyway in front of them. Their leader was an older man with chestnut brown hair and a green breastplate. He gave her a friendly nod, to which Wolfius replied with an equally friendly smile. "Good evening", the man said before continuing his way. To Kersea's surprise, Wolfius even made a short bow. "Good evening, Commander Nathamer", he said, before giving Kersea a short nod and continuing his way.

As soon as the guardsmen were out of sight, his friendly smile dropped. "Hackor Nathamer. Thinks he is so smart, but he is nothing. After I'm finished with blacksmith Mettel and her whore of a daughter, I might target him and whatever fucking family he has" The tone of his voice gave no way for any doubts. Kersea shivered as she looked up to the castle.

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Reaching the castle wasn't the hard part. Even though the city was full of guardsmen, none of them had any experience in systematically searching a dangerous criminal. Wolfius just had to smile and be polite and they would suspect nothing. That was probably one of his most dangerous traits. He was a hideous man, but he concealed his hideosity like a claw, only letting it out when he truly wanted to show it. Sure, he never seemed to be a normal man. There were subtle hints about the beast inside of him, but it was nothing that was truly outstanding. At worst, he appeared strange, but harmless when talking to someone, until he dropped this act. Kersea had seen what Wolfius truly was. She wasn't afraid of him, but only because she knew how to handle a beast.

They evaded the front gates of the castle, instead they took a rocky path that lead around it, up to the side of the wall that didn't face the city. Kersea had a breathtaking view of the sea and the sunset and if it weren't for her company, or her mission, or everything that happened in the last years, she would have actually enjoyed it. "We're going to climb up right here", she said. "Clayton got up here, the wall isn't in a very good shape"

As she looked to Wolfius, she saw that he already grabbed an overhanging brick and started to pull himself up. Bloody showoff! But he wouldn't be up there faster than her! She was climbing faster, grabbing the next brick, pulling herself up, making a risky jump to get to the next brick, soon leaving Wolfius behind her. She felt free, she felt happy, for the first time in months. It was only as she noticed that she was smiling, that the usual horrified feeling came back. There she was, playing race like a little girl would do, like her sister would do, playing it with a psychopath just to get to the woman she was supposed to kill. If she weren't hanging on a overhanging brick five feet above the ground, she would have thrown up. This fucking Butterfly and his whole fucking group of killers started to change her, she felt it. The small moment of joy she felt made her wonder if that was how Alysanne saw the world the whole time. Maybe it would be easier if she would just accept it. There was a beast inside her, a beast that got stronger everytime she felt a dagger in her hand, everytime she stabbed and sliced, everytime she killed. Maybe it would be easier. Maybe it would be better for her. Yes, maybe...

*Maybe not...*

As she finished climbing on top, she was breathing heavily, not only because it had been physically exhausting. Wolfius followed shortly after her, similarly out of breath. Clayton told her that this part of the walls won't receive patrols as regularly as the rest, so they both just took a moment to lay on the ground. Kersea was watching the stars. They were different from her home in the north, from the small, cosy house she had lived in for the first twenty years of her life. The house where Briar was born, where she learned to walk, where Kersea sung with her and played with her. The house where her parents died, on that day where she stopped believing in justice. The house she missed more than anything else... She was wondering if Briar could see the stars from the small room where she was kept in...

"You coming, Kersea?", she heard Wolfius raspy voice. She noticed that he was standing again. Blinking a tear away, she stood up too. Wolfius looked her in the eyes and smiled, an almost genuine smile. "You're not getting soft now, do you?", he asked, almost sympathetically. What was it with him? "No need in hiding. I saw the tear. Your sister?" His question caused her to shiver. The way he said these last two words was wrong. So wrong. Still, she gave him a nod.

"Good. Everyone needs something that motivates him when doing this, some emotion. That's why I despise Clayton. He has no emotions when killing someone. But ending a life is something that needs an emotion. A very special emotion", he said and came closer. She looked at his scarred face and noticed that Wolfius was younger than she thought. The beard and the scars and the piercing eyes made him look older, but he was actually only a few years older than her. "Joy", he whispered and Kersea closed her eyes. What had she expected?

"Joy...", she muttered and Wolfius tone got aggressive again. "I just said that. You need to find joy in what you're doing, or else it will tear you apart. Killing can be so much fun if you start enjoying it", he explained and turned around, facing the large building in which the servants were sleeping.

*Joy...*

"Well... thank you, I guess", she answered, simply because she didn't want to talk to him any longer. Joy... That was what Alysanne felt. She knew, Wolfius was quite fond of her. They were almost soulmates, except that Wolfius was so much worse than Alysanne could ever

be. A deep dark part inside of Kersea wished to be like Alysanne. Carefree. Finding pleasure in killing something. It would be easier.

*It wouldn't be her.*

They entered the servant quarters, long hallways with simple brown doors. "First we're going to get your bitch", Wolfius said and she saw the joy in his eyes. He had only looked at her note for a short moment, but already memorized the directions written on it. That was also one of his dangerous traits. Wolfius was insane, yes, violent, yes, hormone-driven, yes, but Kersea suspected that he was at least as smart as Clayton. She would have been afraid of him, but everytime she looked at him she only saw an extraordinarily smart beast. She saw a monster.

*Joy...*

Wolfius stopped at a corner, signalling her to come closer. "Two guards", he whispered, barely audible. Kersea quickly looked around the corner. Wolfius was right. Two of them, standing right in front of the room her target was supposed to be in. Two guards... Now, they could wait until...

Before she had time to think of a plan, Wolfius started to move around the corner, slightly lifting his overcoat. Kersea held her breath. What was he doing? What was he doing! No! Clayton wouldn't approve of this, he would be angry... But perhaps she was just fed up of pleasing Clayton, perhaps she didn't want to deal with Wolfius.

*Joy...*

"Hey there", she heard one of the guardsmen saying. She closed her eyes and for a moment she thought about covering her ears. "Good evening", Wolfius said. "Maybe you can help me. I'm new and got lost" Kersea shivered as she heard his voice. Barely concealed joy. A beast trying to pass as a human. Sometimes Wolfius failed terribly at being convincingly normal. "Where do you need to go?", one of the guardians answered. Sometimes, but not today... Sadly not today...

"Inside of this room", Wolfius hissed. The guardsmen started to laugh. "Man, that's Lady Halla's room. I'm sure she won't like you, the way you look", he chuckled. "And how do I look?", Wolfius answered. His voice sounded dangerous now, but only Kersea heard it. The guards didn't pay attention. "Don't know... you look like a northerner who tried to fuck a direwolf", the first guard said, causing the second guard to laugh hysterically. And then, the sound of a knife drawn, two surprised screams, gurgling sounds, stabbing sounds, slicing sounds and Wolfius voice. "I'm not a fucking northerner and I've never fucked a direwolf", he growled. "Come on, Kersea. I want to get to the juicy part of this evening"

She walked around the corner. The guardsmen were dead, butchered like pigs. Wolfius had stabbed them in the throat, in the eyes, again, again, again. One of the guardsmen had barely any facial features left. Wolfius gave her a unsettling grin. "After you", he said, pointing at the door.

*Joy...*

The room wasn't as big as Kersea suspected from a housekeeper. It was perfectly clean, tidy, a perfect image of a beautiful room. A haggard woman of about forty years sat on a table and looked up as Kersea entered. She gave her a grimace. "Who are you?", she hissed. "I've told these useless guards that I don't want to be interrupted! And what are you wearing anyway? You have five seconds to...", she started to rant with a shrill and unpleasant sounding voice. Halla Peddle... maybe it would be easier with her...

*Maybe there would be joy...*

Kersea was holding the dagger in her hand, the Hoare dagger. Wolfius entered the room and the housekeeper gave him a startled glare, noticed the bloodstains on his coat and even worse, she noticed the look in his eyes. Kersea knew women like her. In their own world, they were monsters, tyrants of the kitchen, a servant's worst nightmare. But when they were faced with real monsters, they turned to become mice.

She tried to scream, Kersea saw it, Wolfius saw it. She knew, Wolfius had experience with preventing people from screaming. With a speed she hadn't thought possible from him, he ran up to her and delivered a fierce blow to her throat. Instead of a scream, a pained gurgle emerged from her mouth, as Halla went to her knees, tears in her eyes, gasping for air. Wolfius walked behind her, calmly, pleased, joyful, grabbing her right arm and twisting it. The housekeeper went to the ground, tears flowing down her face as she tried to scream. Kersea closed her eyes as she heard a cracking sound.

"Please...", Halla managed to say. "Please, no... Please, mercy", she whined, still gasping for air, her arm broken, her face a mask of sheer terror. Kersea looked at Wolfius, who gave her a wide grin. She went to her knees, next to the woman and gave her the only mercy she could give...

"The fuck?", Wolfius snarled as Kersea pulled her dagger out of Halla's neck. "She went down too easy. I was going to target her eyes next. Oh, how they scream when I target their eyes...", he hissed, but quickly looked up. "Someone is coming!", he whispered. Kersea gulped and grabbed her dagger. Her hands weren't shaking. She was calm.

*Still, there was no joy...*

As she walked out of the room, she saw a guardsman looking absolutely horrified at the corpses of his fallen comrades, giving her a startled look. It was a young boy, maybe five or six years younger than she was. Barely grown... Kersea saw him opening his mouth, knew what he would do, knew that she couldn't let that happen. For Briar! And for a short moment, Kersea acted like a beast would act. She threw the dagger, the Hoare dagger, she hit him in the throat...

*...a son, a brother, a father. If only she could stop thinking about it, if only she could stop caring, it would be easier, if only there would be joy for her. But there was no joy. There was only Kersea, all alone with her guilt, a girl who couldn't stop caring, a girl who killed a son, a brother, a father...*

*No joy...*

Wolfius gave her an approving whistle. "Nice throw", he complimented her. It was a genuine compliment, which made it all worse. "Now, let us put these poor fucks inside this whore's room. And then I want to find me a Harking", he decided.

And they found him a Harking. It took him only a short while to drag the bodies into Halla's room. It took him even shorter to find Jenna Harking's room. It was almost as if he knew this castle. And there she was, walking up to her room, Kersea and Wolfius watching her from behind a corner. Jenna was a young girl, even younger than the boy Kersea just killed. She was pretty, prettier than Kersea thought, but a bit thin. Not too thin for Wolfius apparently, who licked his lips. "There she is... a little Harking girl. This will be wonderful", he chuckled, before giving Kersea a stern look. "Remember our deal. You'll give me time. Keep watch. If anyone comes, I'll have to make it quick. But, oh, I would hate to make it quick..."

As soon as they heard the door, Wolfius and Kersea walked around the corner. Jenna had gone into her room. Kersea closed her eyes. Jenna Harking. The girl's name was Jenna Harking. And she was about to get killed by a monster. The old Kersea would have fought

against Wolfius, but the old Kersea was gone, ever since they took Briar from her. And the new Kersea did everything they wanted from her. For Briar...

Wolfius entered the room. Kersea heard muffled voices, a small talk. Jenna Harking did not scream, at least not at first. But then, a sudden scream, the sound of a knife getting drawn. Kersea had to close her eyes again, she did not want to see this, she did not want to hear this. Killing her was one thing, but this? Jenna deserved better. And Kersea couldn't stop caring. She couldn't. She wouldn't. She had to do something... but Wolfius wouldn't be too thrilled. She had to do something, she didn't want to hear Jenna's screams anymore, wanted it to be over!

*Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop, no joy, no joy, never any joy again*

**[Walk away]**

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## **John**

"Samantha!", Gutten said. The woman looked at him, her blue eyes carefully maintaining eye contact with his one brown eye. "You will protect them. Don't fail me" Samantha gave him a bright smile. "You're doing the right thing, John. You won't regret it!", she promised but was cut short as Temari gave her a glare. "He won't have time to regret it if anything happens to Behara. And neither will you", he growled. Samantha's smile vanished. "I'll keep her safe, Tem. I know what she means to you and I'll keep her safe with my life", she said with a stern voice and Temari's face softened. "I know you will. Don't get killed out there, please", he whispered and Samantha's smile returned. "I haven't been killed so far and I don't intend on starting now", she chuckled.

With light steps, Janae moved down the stairs. She wasn't wearing armour, but carried her bow, a quiver full of arrows and Samantha's small axes. Gutten gave her a bright smile and she answered with her usual frown. "There you are, you big old bear", she hissed. "What took you so long?" Gutten looked at the inn's backroom. "Had a long talk with Cass", he answered and Janae shook her head. "Well, while you were busy having fun with your girl, some of us actually fought for their lives", she answered, handing Samantha her axes. The other woman took her with a stern nod and Janae raised an eyebrow as she was heading to the backroom. "You're sending Sammy away?", she asked, but before Gutten could answer, Aylard did it for him. The innkeeper was pale and bleeding from his wound, but he didn't look like dropping unconscious every moment. "He sends her away to protect my son and my workers", he growled and Janae looked at Gutten as if he had lost his mind. "We could use her, you know that", she said and Gutten shook his head. "We could. But we won't. Think about it Janae. If these people get killed, could you live with it?", he asked. Janae shrugged as an answer. "I know for sure if I die today because we're one fighter less, I can't live with that", she answered, but turned to Samantha. "Don't get yourself killed, girl", she said and Samantha let out a bright laugh. "Why is everybody telling me that?", she asked, before looking at Aylard. "You're coming?", she asked. To Gutten's surprise, the innkeeper shook his head. "It's like Janae said. You're one less. I can fight. I can stall them, so that you can lead my son to safety", he explained.

Gutten looked to the inn's door. It would only be a matter of time until these bandits would attack again. Aylard was a fighter, that was sure, but he was also wounded. Still, it would be his own decision. He was about to give him an approving nod as his gaze fell upon little



Sawyer. Aylard's son was clearly frightened, looking at the dead people, tears flowing down his face. What was it what Samantha always said? Family was important...

"Aylard...", he said softly and the innkeeper gave him a glare. "Don't you even dare, Gutten. Don't you dare sending me away. I can fight. This is my inn and I'm dying here!" As Sawyer heard these words, he began sobbing and Samantha put a hand on his shoulder. The boy turned around and hugged her, weeping uncontrollably. "Aylard, think of your son. You are the only one he has left. I saw the graves in the backyard. Your family, right?", Gutten asked. Aylard's stern face got a sad look. "My wife, Barbeth", he answered sullenly. "Six of my children. Some sickness took them, not even a year ago" Gutten noticed tears in the man's eyes. "Sawyer and Lunett are all I have left. Please, John, I can only pray that my daughter returns to me, but I can protect my son. Let me protect him!", the innkeeper urged him. Gutten looked at Sawyer. "You have to protect him", he answered. "You have to protect him, by going with him. Think about what it will do to him when you die here!"

Aylard did not answer at first. He looked at the warhammer in his hands, looked at his son. Gutten saw how he hung his head low. "You are right...", the innkeeper mumbled, before shuffling to the backroom, Samantha and Sawyer following him. Standing in the door, Aylard turned around again. "Seven with you, John Gutten. You aren't a bad man", he said and went into the backroom. John looked after him, shaking his head. Aylard was wrong. He wasn't a good man, he would even go as far as calling himself a bad man.

*She had called him kinslayer*

He had a beast inside him, but he understood it better than most to hide it, to cage it and to only let it out when needed. And right now might be a good time to let it out. John saw someone walking out of the backroom. Cass... Oh no... Tears were running down her face and she was holding the sword she took from the dead bandit. She was holding it completely wrong of course, but the look she gave Gutten was fierce, fiercer than most looks he had ever seen. The little sept girl had some spirit, he knew it, but the anger in her face surprised him. "You're sending us away?", she asked, her voice trembling. "You're sending me away? It's not enough that you're going to leave me, now you even want to die here without me?" Gutten sighed and closed his eye. "Cass...", he mumbled, but she cut him off. "No! Don't you even dare saying anything. I will stay here. I already saved your life out there and I will do it again!", she hissed. Janae raised an eyebrow. "Seriously, John? You're getting old", she said mockingly. "Anyway, if your girl wants to stay, let her. We don't have time to deal with her" Cass gave her a glare. "I won't stand in your way", she insisted and Temari let out a laugh. "I'm pretty sure you won't, cause you're going to get yourself killed the moment you try to fight one of these bandits", he chuckled. "But, hey, I don't judge you. It's your funeral" Gutten sighed. "Cass. You can't stay here. I've sent Samantha with you for a good reason. It's going to get dangerous in here", he told her, but her expression didn't soften. "Do I look like I care?", she simply answered. Before Gutten could say something again, he was interrupted by Janae. "Shh", she hissed. "Door"

As he looked to the door, he heard the sound of footsteps. Janae drew her bow, aiming at the door. John gave Cass a last worried look, before narrowing his eye, facing the door. Temari took a few steps closer. He was pale from his wound, but Gutten knew that he was able to withstand much more. Temari wasn't an Ironborn, but he could have easily passed as one.

The first man who entered the inn died in an instant as Janae put an arrow in his neck. The second man came a few steps farther until suffering the same fate. The third man came in

range of Gutten's sword, before Janae put an arrow in his head. A fourth man decided to attack Temari, while the other bandits decided to take on Gutten. A fourth man charged at Cass, but Janae managed to kill him before he came even close to reach her. Gutten didn't wait until his opponents attacked. He took the offensive, taking the first swing at the man to his right. Steel hit flesh, the beast inside of him was satisfied. With a heavy move he pulled the sword out of his opponent's chest to parry a strike from the second man. Before Gutten could deliver his own attack, Cass jumped at the bandit, delivering a weak strike to his back. It wasn't enough to kill him, but it was enough to make him lash out at her in a mad fit of rage. The bandit's fist hit her in the face and she stumbled backwards, closer to the inn's door, falling onto the ground. Before the bandit could face Gutten again, the beast grabbed him by the throat delivering a heavy strike with the hilt of his sword to the man's face. Another strike. Another strike. Another strike. The bandit's body went limp. Another strike. Another strike. Gutten let go of the man, who sunk to the ground, only to never rise again. He heard heavy footsteps and looked up to the inn's door. A large figure walked in, stepping over the corpses of fallen bandits. It was a man, taller than Gutten, more muscular, wearing a completely black and very heavy armour, with a helmet formed like a bear's head. Underneath the armour, dark skin was visible, similar to the skin some people from the Free Cities had. The man wore a large two-handed sword strapped over his back, but hadn't drawn it. Gutten remembered what the bandit in the barn said. "Let me guess...", he said. "You must be Bear"

The man, whose face was barely visible underneath the helmet, gave him a cruel smile and Gutten took a look into the man's eyes. Darkness. A lust for violence. Insanity. The beast roared in its cage. "And who the fuck are you?", he growled. His voice was deep and dark, almost as dark as his eyes. "Who the actual fuck are you people?", he continued, this time a bit louder. Temari was still fighting his opponent, but was slightly distracted by this bear. Gutten gripped his sword harder as he saw Cass moving next to the man's feet. "My name is John Gutten. I protect this inn. You and your men will leave, or die!", he growled. The man let out a loud, terrifying laugh. "The fuck we'll do", he hissed before bowing his head mockingly into Janae's direction. "Good evening, bitch. My name is Bear", he chuckled. John didn't turn around to face Janae, but from the amused reaction on Bear's face, he knew how Janae was looking at him. "You fucks slaughtered my men", Bear hissed, his voice getting very low. "I thought a fucking army was in here. But it were just... just two one-eyed fucks and two little bitches. So, you managed to stall my men? To fucking slaughter them?" All of a sudden, he let out a deep, growling laugh. Befitting to his name, it sounded more like a bear roaring. "I'm going to tear you to pieces for this", he said, while looking at Gutten. "You and the other fucker. The bitches can live until they start to bore me and my men" A sudden noise behind John almost caused him to look around. He heard the sound of glass shattering and a battlecry, as someone attacked Janae from behind. She could manage, she had to manage, she couldn't die here!

Bear took a few steps closer, almost into range of Gutten's sword and looked him deep in the eye. "And I'm fucking merciful with this", he hissed, before jumping at Gutten, simply dodging a hit from him. How could he be so agile with armour like this? Bear still hadn't drawn his sword, instead he gave Gutten a punch to the chin, hard enough to almost break his jaw. Gutten went down on the ground, Bear jumping on top of him, pressing the air out of his lungs, knocking the sword out of his hand. Out of the corner of his eye, Gutten saw Temari still fighting against his opponent. His wound affected him visibly, especially while parrying.

As he tried to breathe, he noticed that he barely managed to get air, with his opponent sitting in top of him. Bear took a swing to Gutten's face, but John managed to block it with his hands, grabbing Bear's fist. In that moment he saw it. Knives. Tiny little knives embedded into Bear's glove. A bear's claws.... Bear simply raised his other hand delivering a punch with his open palm, right into Gutten's face. John felt the knives scratching across his face, narrowly missing his one good eye, cutting through the eyepatch above his right eye, plunging deep into his empty eyesocket, cutting his left cheek. And he screamed, for the first time in years he screamed in pain and let down his guard. Bear delivered a second punch, this time with his fist closed, right into John's face. While the first hit was painful, this one almost caused him to lose consciousness. The bear's claws were stained with blood, as he raised his right hand, opening his palm in an attempt to hit him again. Gutten knew, Bear intended to maul him like an animal would. He had fought against animals, even against real bears, but never before against a human like that.

The claws came closer, terribly fast, only to stop as something slender pierced the armour at the forearm, piercing deep into the flesh. An arrow. Janae's arrow. His maiden fair had his back, as always. Bear let out a surprised cry of rage and looked up. Gutten used this time to reach out his hand. He felt the cold hilt of his sword, grabbed it and moved it towards Bear's head. He hadn't enough room and he hadn't enough strength left to make it a lethal blow, but he managed to hit Bear hard enough in the head to make him stagger backwards. Sweet, fresh air filled Gutten's lungs, almost making him ignore his bleeding face, the terribly numb feeling in his head and the pain he felt in his ribs while breathing in. He hadn't met an opponent like this in a long time. Ten years ago, he would have probably wiped the floor with Bear. Probably...

He heard a gurgling sound, followed by the dull sound of someone bashing someone else's head against a wooden table. Temari had defeated his opponent and was about to bash the man's head in, in a terrible fit of rage. For one moment, Gutten asked himself why Bear wasn't attacking him again. He had to... By the Drowned God, why was everything so blurry? He had to get up... Was that blood in his good eye? Why wasn't Janae shooting at this Bear? Why wasn't Temari attacking? He saw him, sword in hand, giving Gutten a worried look, before looking at someone in front of Gutten, someone right in his blind spot. Damned blind spot...

He forced himself to stand up, seeing Janae, her bow drawn. To her feet lay a dead bandit, an arrow sticking in his face. She was aiming... at him? No, at someone behind him. Why wasn't she shooting? Why was everything so damnably blurry? The blow wasn't that hard, was it?

He turned around and reality hit him harder than Bear had. The dizzy feeling was gone in an instant, replaced by cold fear and the sound of his heavily beating heart. Bear was standing in front of him, a cruel smile on his face, his eyes almost glowing with brutality. And in his left hand, the one that hadn't been hit by Janae's arrow, he held Cass.

The girl was conscious and gave John a frightened glare, a look so full of terror that John had to remember Orkmont. His brother gave him a look like this as Gutten smashed his head in. *She* gave him a look like this as she was hit by his own sword. His mother gave him a look like this, before she called him kinslayer. And right now, he gave Cass this look as well.

"One fucking step closer and I'll end this bitch", Bear growled. The knives in his glove were touching Cass' throat, Bear's index finger scratching over her chin, leaving a red cut on her

porcelain skin. Her eyes widened, but John could tell that the grip he had her in was too hard for her to gulp or to scream. And she wanted to scream, Gutten could tell it, she wanted to scream and to kick. But she was too afraid. Gutten was afraid too. He hadn't been afraid like this in a long time...

"Let her go", he said and was shocked by how weak his voice sounded. He had tried to be strong, but Bear had been stronger. His face was burning in agony, his eyepatch torn apart, his nose broken. But he stood straight. "Please... let her go..."

Bear let out his terrifyingly roaring laugh. "And why should I do that?", he asked. "Because I'm going to put an arrow through your eye if you don't", Janae hissed. "Let her go, you son of a bitch, let her go or I will bring you pain like you can't imagine"

This caused Bear to laugh even louder. "You fucking bitch...", he chuckled. "You try to intimidate me? You think I am scared of a whore like you?" Gutten narrowed his eye, seeing Temari unsure, maybe for the first time since he met him. "Don't attack him, Temari...", Gutten hissed and Bear gave him a brutal smile. "Yeah, don't you fucking dare, Temari", he said mockingly. "Or else I'll rip out this bitches throat and stuff your good eye into her, you freak!"

Gutten could tell that Temari was violently furious. But now wasn't the time to be angry. Now wasn't the time to attack... As much as he hated it, Bear had a hostage. Even worse, he had Cass as his hostage. One step, one tiny movement, and he would put his terrible knives into her throat. Gutten saw that she barely dared to breathe. He remembered Orkmont. He wouldn't loose her, he wouldn't loose her again!

"What do you want?", he finally asked and Bear let out another laugh. "Now we're talking. You surprised me. You know, my Band of Claws has over a hundred men. But they are not here. I have maybe half a dozen more in these fucking woods. I've never suspected a shitty inn like this putting up any resistance" He made a mocking bow. "I will retreat. You have time to bring your people away. I will come back, with a hundred men. And, like this fucking Targaryen dragonlord on his stupid fucking island says, I will bring fire and blood with me. You have one day. You will let me go and I will spare your little whore. Would be a shame to rip out a throat as fine as hers, right?", he growled.

Gutten had been a mercenary for fifteen years, but he had never met someone whom he instantly hated. Bear was the first. A monster. A true monster. Even the beast inside of him was impressed, maybe even intimidated. "Or you allow this fucking whore behind you to try her luck", Bear explained. "What are you even supposed to be, girl? Whores shouldn't pretend to be men", he chuckled. Gutten turned around and saw Janae furious. She was rarely furious, always cold, always distant, his maiden fair, his best and only friend. But right now she was boiling with anger. "I'm going to kill this son of a bitch, John, I'm going to kill him", she hissed. "He can't take us three, he can't even take me. Give me the order. Allow me to end his life"

"You are really a stupid fucking whore, you know that?", Bear growled, sounding almost amused, looking blissfully at Cass' bleeding chin. "I don't need to take you all. This one-eyed cunt, this *John*, he won't give you the order because he is too afraid to loose his little bitch" He looked Gutten straight in the eye. "So, John, I'm telling you how we're doing it. You will agree to my terms. The bitch will drop her bow. I will drop your whore, alive and as fine as a fuck. I will leave. You will have time to leave. Tomorrow, the band of claws will be back, we will burn this place to the ground and we will kill every fucker we can find. You can prevent this by leaving after I'm gone. I'm fucking merciful here, I'm giving you a chance"

Gutten looked at Janae who shook her head. "You know that he is lying. I shoot him, he drops Cass. Maybe alive. It's her best chance", she said. Bear spat onto the ground. "The bitch talks to much. You should cut out her tongue, would make her a lot better, trust me. If she shoots, she might kill me, I'll give her that. But is her arrow fast enough? I only need one tiny movement, only need to stretch my hand and your whore is dead. You want that? You want a dead whore? The moment you order the bitch to shoot me, I will kill this whore, even though it would be a waste of one fine ass", he growled, his smirk becoming wider.

"He is lying, John. He won't let her live. You remember the Qohorik we met in Pentos? The one who did these... things to rich girls? You remember how he lied to you about sparing that girl? Come on, John, you are smarter than that!", Janae urged him. John recognized this. He never met a Qohorik in Pentos. It was a code. He only needed to tell her that he understood and she would shoot. Bear wouldn't realize it until it would be too late. Maybe he could save Cass like that... or maybe Janae was too reckless, maybe he needed to let Bear go to save the girl he... liked.

**[Signal Janae to shoot]**

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### **Jaron**

Jaron grabbed a cup of wine from the tablet. "Why not? Guess I've slept enough in the past week. Damn poppy stuff", he chuckled. "How is the Burned Man able to drink the milk like this anyway?"

"It's highly diluted, or else he wouldn't be able to lead his people like he does", Harpy explained and for a very short moment her confident smile wasn't convincing. "When he isn't under the influence of the milk, he is brilliant. He has a wonderful mind. But there is also the pain. The first weeks in Oldtown, when we hadn't had enough money to buy milk from the Citadel had been terrible, for him, for me. I was eight years old and he begged me to end it for him..." She looked away, staring at her cup of wine.

"But you made it, right?", Jaron asked, trying to comfort her. Her smile returned, but she still avoided to look him in the eyes. "Yes. We made it", she mumbled and for a moment she seemed as if she wanted to say something else, when Martin cleared his throat. "Okay then", he said with a smile. "I'd like to propose a little game. We have time, we have wine and we know nothing about each other. Perfect opportunity"

Harpy raised an eyebrow and looked at Martin. "Seriously?", she asked with a mocking tone in her voice. "That's ridiculous"

Martin shrugged. "It's a game. Fun. You know the word, mylady, right?" Harpy gave him a short smile. "*You* are ridiculous", she said again, before sighing. "Fine. But I hope it's not one of these saucy tavern games"

Martin shook his head. "Not as long as we try to behave. It's a pretty easy game. I make a guess about you. If I guess right, you drink. If I guess wrong, I drink. If I want to drink, I drink. And after a while, we all know each other like a family. And naturally, none of us will remember anything tomorrow", he explained and Harpy let out a short laugh. "It sounds boring!", she moaned, but she smiled as she said it.

"It's not boring!", Martin insisted again. "Here, let me ask you a question, okay?" Harpy sighed again and looked at Jaron. "You want to play this?", she asked. Jaron couldn't contain a grin. He knew games like these and even though they weren't his favourite drinking games, he knew worse. "Sounds like a perfect opportunity to kill some time", he answered

and Harpy rolled with her eyes. "Fine then. Looks like I'm outvoted. Ask your question, Martin"

Martin leant forwards and looked Harpy deep in the eyes. "You were born in slavery", he stated and Harpy raised her cup. "Come on, that hardly counts as a question. It's like asking Ser Jaron if he is a bastard", she complained, but took a deep sip from her cup. "Ugh, we really shouldn't play with this stuff", she exclaimed and made a grimace.

Martin looked at Jaron. "See? That's how the game works. Now make a statement about me", he insisted. Jaron thought about that for a moment. "You come from the Free Cities", he stated and Martin looked at him in surprise, before taking a sip. "What gave me away?", he asked. "Your general stupidity and cockiness", Harpy remarked and earned a short glare from Martin. "The hint of an accent", Jaron explained after suppressing a smile. "I'd say you are a Pentoshi"

This time Martin grinned. "Drink, Ser Jaron. I may not look the part, but I was born and raised in Braavos. My parents have been Westerosi mercenaries though", he explained and Jaron took a sip from his cup, noticing that Martin did the same. Seven Hells, this wine was terrible! And far stronger than expected...

"My turn", Harpy proclaimed, looking at Jaron, who was still grimacing from the horrible wine. Still, he couldn't help but to give her a curious look. "What? Don't say the Burned Man doesn't know everything about me already", he said and Harpy quickly shook her head. "Do you imply we would spy on you? Besides, do I look like the Burned Man?", she answered and gave him a bright smile. "Not quite...", Jaron mumbled, reciprocating her smile.

"At least you're not blind", Harpy remarked. "Now, it's still my turn. Hmm..." She seemed to think for a moment. "Your mother's name was Janissa", she stated and Jaron gave her a startled look. "You *have* spied on me!", he exclaimed and Harpy looked genuinely insulted. "What? No, no, like I said, we would never spy on you. Are you implying we would spy on you? It was a lucky guess, nothing more", she explained, looking at Martin who gave her a nod. "Yeah, totally. Lucky guess. The mylady can get lucky, you know... So, drink, Ser Jaron", he chuckled, but took a sip from his cup as well. "Hey, that stuff get's better with every sip! Where'd you get that, Harpy?" Harpy shrugged. "Straight out of harbour basin, I guess", she answered. Jaron took a gulp from his cup, noticing Harpy doing the same. No, it still tasted like vomit...

"My turn!", Martin proclaimed, smiling at Jaron. "You've killed over a dozen men in your life", he stated and Jaron raised an eyebrow. A dozen? He remembered, there was a bandit from some small group he and Ser Matthos had hunted. It had been his first kill and it was sheer luck. Shortly after that, he had killed a drunkard who had tried to stab him. Even later he had killed three dornish highwaymen, members of some dornish bandit group that terrorized small farms in the Marches. He still remembered it as his finest moment. He stood knee-deep in mud and blood, around him the corpses of his opponents, he was bleeding from a small wound, he was exhausted and Ser Matthos had knighted him. Jaron had never been prouder in all his life

"Half a dozen", he said with a slight smile and Martin chuckled. "Not as experienced as I thought", he said with a smirk before taking a gulp from his cup. "You think you're good enough to take on the insect? Longbow Jaylon? The Fang of Shadows?" Jaron shrugged. Of course, he knew he likely wasn't as good as this Fang of Shadows, especially after seeing how afraid Harpy was of that man. But he wasn't a bad fighter either. And he felt brave. Maybe it was just the wine, but he felt braver than ever. "I guess I will find out", he said and

Martin clapped his hands. "That's the spirit, my friend! Valar Morghulis, as they say in my city", he exclaimed.

Harpy gave him a short glare. "Valar Dohaeris, Martin. That's not funny", she said, before taking another sip from the cup. "Anyway. Your turn, Ser Jaron. Make a statement about me or, if you really want to, make a statement about Martin"

Jaron gave her a bold smile. Gods, this wine was strong indeed... "Alright then. You are not a pure-blooded Ghiscari", he stated. Harpy gave him an impressed nod and took a sip, Martin did the same. "Impressive eyesight you have, Ser Jaron. My mother was from Yunkai. My father on the other hand...", she started to explain, but Jaron cut her off. "Say nothing. Fair skin. It's Tyrosh, right?"

Harpy gave him a look of feigned offendedness. "Do I look like a Tyroshi to you? I've never felt the need to colour my hair", she snarled and Jaron took a deep gulp out of his cup, before grabbing the carafe in front of him. "That's probably a good thing", he said, unsure what to answer. Harpy raised an eyebrow. "I know", she hissed. "My father was a Lysene, as far as I know. Never met him, never missed him" For a moment her smile faded, before returning, visibly less convincing. "But the empire of Old Ghis was destroyed three thousand years ago. I'm probably no less pure-blooded than Abbas or Bakr"

"So... Lys? Do you know I have Lysene blood in me as well, mylady?", Martin asked and Harpy gave him a short glare. "If you say so" She sounded mildly annoyed. Martin leant forwards and refilled his cup with the help of the carafe. "My turn!", he proclaimed and looked Harpy deep in the eyes. "Lady Harpy, now that I know you are of Lysene blood, I'd say you are good at both of the Lysene specialities", he said with a grin that was likely supposed to be charming. Jaron felt slight annoyance at this man.

Harpy's smile returned, more genuine than ever. "My, my. And you promised it wouldn't be a saucy game", she smiled. Martin smiled back. "Guess I just can't behave. Proof that you shouldn't trust me", he answered and now Jaron felt a little bit more annoyed at him. And the wine was still strong, far stronger than the stuff Jaron was used to.

Harpy raised her cup. "It's only one of the Lysene specialities I'm good at. Drink, Martin, and hope it's not the poisonmaking", she proclaimed. Martin, visibly drunken, went pale. "What have you... I didn't mean to insult... you haven't... have you?", he stuttered and Harpy gave him a charming smile. "Drink", she simply said and Martin took a small sip.

Harpy looked at him carefully, not saying anything, before putting her cup down. "They say I'm quite good with poison", she mumbled and Martin spluttered his wine all over the table. As he noticed her facial expression, Jaron couldn't help but laugh, while Martin looked at him, quickly understanding what just happened. "That will teach you to ask a damsel a question like that", Harpy said, before putting her cup down. "And now, we should all stop playing this horrible game before you ask something I am not allowed to answer" She gave Jaron a sweet smile and the knight noticed that he was grinning. The alcohol suddenly didn't seem so strong anymore. "And I'd really hate poisoning you, you can believe me that", she added as her smile turned to a smirk.

Martin gave her a hasty nod. "Sure, mylady. If you favour a simple conversation over my elaborate drinking game, why don't you suggest a topic?", he said, still eyeing his wine suspiciously. Harpy took a slight sip from her cup, before putting it down. Her smile vanished, replaced by a stern look. "Butterfly", she said. "I want to talk about Butterfly" Martin let out a groan. "Really, Harpy? The insect?" Harpy gave him a sharp look. "Butterfly, Martin. Just as I don't appreciate it if the Burned Man is called a cripple, Butterfly won't

appreciate it if you call him an insect”, she explained and Martin shrugged. “So what? You don’t think he’s listening to our little conversation, eh?”, he chuckled. Harpy shook her head. “Of course not. But insulting an enemy is something he would do. The Burned Man does not stoop so low” Her gaze hardened as she looked at Martin. “Neither do I. And neither will you”, she said with a commanding tone in her voice.

“So...”, Jaron said and as Harpy looked at him, her stare got considerably more friendly. “Butterfly. How long is he a threat in this city?”, he asked. “Four years. At first it wasn’t that alarming. Some of our people disappeared. Things like that happened in Oldtown, you know... and the Burned Man wasn’t the only crimelord in this city during that time. There was the Silver Lady, an old woman, rumoured to be of Valyrian descent, who commanded the cities smugglers. There was Iron Ivar, a retired raider who specialised in trading with slaves. Aeron Blacksails, the pirate king of the Stepstone Islands had operations in this city. They lost men too. At first we suspected Ivar, but he turned out to be innocent. Well, as innocent as a slaver can be. Then, one by one, the old crimelords vanished from Oldtown. Iron Ivar went down fighting, killed in a nameless alleyway not far from here. The Silver Lady was poisoned in her sleep. Blacksails was cunning enough to withdraw his involvement in Oldtown”, she explained and closed her eyes. “I wished that Ar... the Burned Man... I wish he would have retreated too. Whoever this new enemy was, he tried to scare us away at first. The Burned Man had opportunities to leave the city. I urged him to return to his hometown of Lorath. He had always promised to go there with me” As she opened her eyes, Jaron noticed a sadness in Harpy’s eyes, and a look more befitting to a woman thrice her age. “One day, we found a survivor. A young boy. I happened to know him. His name was Endrew, he was an orphan and a bastard, like so many here in this city. He joined the Burned Man for a copper coin a day and a warm meal every two days, which is more than twice the payment he would have received from Blacksails or Ivar. His only job was to be one pair of eyes and ears near the Starry Sept. He was a kind boy and... so full of life and full of dreams. His forearms and his feet had been removed, as well as his eyes”, Harpy continued, but made a pause and stopped looking Jaron in the eyes. The knight noticed tears in the corners of her eyes. “Are you alright, mylady?”, he asked.

Harpy gave him a soft nod. “Yes. Yes, of course. He recognized my voice, you know. Before we gave him mercy, he told us a single word. Repeated it, again and again, until it was so deeply embedded into my mind that I had nightmares for weeks” She looked him in the eyes again and Jaron noticed something he hadn’t noticed before. Her dark eyes were filled with anger, perhaps even hatred. “Butterfly”, she said. “Ever since, we were at war”

Jaron gave her a nod. He understood her anger, he understood it very well. Of course, he had no illusions about what Harpy might be capable of. She was in league with the Burned Man after all. But still, in this moment, he understood her. “And you never had any idea who he might be?”, he asked.

Harpy shook her head. “At first we suspected Mullendore. His sigil is a swarm of butterflies, you know. He and Butterfly target criminals”, she explained. “But who would actually use their sigil as a nickname when trying to remain incognito? I mean, you hear about that in your stories all the time, but who would *actually* do that? Later, we learned that Mullendore lost men too. And that he was trembling with rage at Butterfly, for killing his men and for using his sigil. This is also not the way he does things. Mullendore is a cruel man, someone I don’t want to be locked in a room with. But he isn’t a particularly cunning man, he can’t even read his own letters. Butterfly on the other hand... we assume he deliberately picked this



name to provoke Mullendore. Maybe he has some grudge against him, we don't know. We targeted...", she explained, but was cut off by the sound of someone banging at the door. Martin stood up, looking at Harpy who gave him a short nod. Visibly tipsy, he started to stagger to the door, a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Who's there?", he asked. "Himani", a soft voice answered and Jaron saw Harpy relaxing and Martin opening the door. The young boy Jaron met a few days ago came into the room, giving Jaron and Harpy a bow. "M'lady Harpy, Ser Jaron. You're having fun, I see", he said with a smile.

Harpy opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but quickly closed it and looked at Jaron. She actually smiled genuinely now, even though a hint of sadness was still visible in her eyes. "Glad to have you here, Himani", she remarked and the boy gave her a bright smile. "That'll change once I take one of these spoons with me", he explained and looked at Jaron. "Ser Jaron, good to see that you're not dead"

A painful sting flashed through Jaron's ribs and he slightly shivered. "It was pretty close, Himani", he explained. Himani gave him a happy nod. "I know. The Burned Man sent Abbas and Bakr to meet up with your friends, to save them", he explained and Harpy gave him a startled look. "Abbas and Bakr? Why hasn't he told me anything about that?", she demanded to know. Himani simply shrugged. "Guess he had no time. I've just found out that Fang and Longbow were heading towards the ship. So he had to act", he explained.

Harpy gave him a confused nod. "Well... Fang and Longbow aren't our main problem here. I think Abbas and Bakr are suited to deal with them. Who knows, maybe they'll even kill them. Or get themselves killed", she explained and her facial expression hardened. "There is one thing the Burned Man can't tolerate. Treason. Someone leaked information about Ser Jaron, information about several other members of our organisation. We lost a dozen pairs of eyes and ears in the past five days. As much as I hate it, but it appears we have a traitor in our organisation"

Jaron raised an eyebrow. Our organisation? Harpy looked at him and gave him a disarming smile. "From my perspective, you are more one of us than these slavers ever would be. You almost got killed and if it weren't for your friends from that ship, you would have been dead. That's why I trust you" She looked at Martin. "You are a pain in the ass. You have a terrible sense of humour. And I'd rather play an Ironborn fingerdance than playing one of your drinking games ever again. But you are smart enough to know that we pay better than Butterfly ever would" Before Martin could say anything, Harpy looked at Himani. "And after all the Burned Man did for you... you would still be in Astapor if it weren't for him. You know how to repay a debt like this"

Himani's smile vanished and for the first time since Jaron met him he seemed to be serious. "With loyalty, m'lady", he said and Harpy gave him a pleased nod. "With loyalty", she repeated and looked at Jaron. "How are you feeling, Jaron? I mean your ribs. Are you able to fight?", she asked. Jaron touched his ribs. The pain was still there, it was still bad. But he was on his best way to recover. "I hope so, mylady"

For a moment, Jaron was thinking she would give him a smile again, but to his disappointment, she simply gave him a nod. "Very good. We have a shortage of good fighters and even worse, we have a shortage of decent men. You are not a bad fighter and you are not a bad man. However, your wound will affect you, I am almost certain of that. That's why you will only support either Martin or Himani in the tasks I have thought out for them"

She stood up, facing Jaron, Martin and Himani. "We need to set up a trap for the traitor. I have checked our men in the past five days. There are two men who have aroused my suspicion", she explained and looked at Martin. "You will target a man who goes by the name of Robb. A mercenary from the Riverlands, involved in smuggling goods out of Oldtown. For a few weeks now, he displayed suspicious behaviour. One of the urchins I sent to follow him told me that he was meeting someone without informing us about it"

Martin made a sigh. "I know Robb. He appears like a bad man until you get to know him better. I really don't want to hurt him", he said with a sullen expression, but his face lit up as Harpy pulled a golden coin out of a small leathery purse on her belt. "A hundred of these for you if you help us", she said. Martin gave her a short bow. "Mylady Harpy, I am yours!", he proclaimed and gave her a charming smile.

Without looking at Martin, Harpy faced Himani. "You will target a man who is named Jarek, involved in dealing lessons to the Burned Man's enemies. He is involved in shady business... I mean shadier than ours and apparently he does freelance work for someone inside the Starry Sept. We know Butterfly has contacts to the Sept", she explained and Martin let out a sigh again. "Another good man. Jarek is a bit cocky and impulsive, but nonetheless a good man. I don't think either of them is a traitor", he explained. Himani gave Harpy a determined nod. "I'll spy on him, mylady. For you and for the Burned Man"

Lastly, Harpy looked at Jaron and this time she gave him a sweet smile. "You, Jaron, will accompany one of them. Robb is an experienced fighter, but Jarek is more cunning than him. I'd leave it up to you who you want to target here and who you want to support. In either case, I don't envy you, because you'll spend a day with either Martin, or with Himani", she said and earned two glares with the last line.

### **[Help Martin and target Robb]**

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### **Garthon**

He sighed. No, he did not want to die wet, hungry and tired. And he knew, neither did George, even if his companion didn't know it yet. It was going to be a dark night either way and a road in the Riverlands wasn't exactly the place Garthon would spend it. "Come on, George", he said with a sigh. "I really don't want to ride the whole night through this rain" George's facial expression hardened. "I thought you were Ironborn. This is only water", he said and Garthon narrowed his eyes. If there was one thing he absolutely hated, then it was being mocked, especially from some stupid and far too idealistic fish. "It's not the rain I'm afraid of. But what we are trying to do is something every sane man should be afraid of", he hissed. George shook his head. "Lord Tully is not afraid", he answered and Garthon gave him a smirk. "That's exactly what I'm saying", he answered. "Now, come on, boy! Somewhere in there, a buxom wench just waits to serve you more ale than you can ever drink"

George gave him a curious look and for a moment Garthon was afraid the boy didn't know the meaning of the words buxom, wench and ale. But to his relief, he gave him a nod. "Fine, Garthon. It's your call. I've never seen myself as much of a decision-maker anyways", he said and Garthon suppressed a smile. Yeah, he could see that. Still, the boy must be good for something, he was one of Tully's most trusted soldiers after all.

As they rode closer to the inn, Garthon noticed that it wasn't very tall. A two-story building with a stable next to it. Nothing special. But he didn't want something special, as long as it

was warm and dry. And maybe he would meet company more pleasant than George's. Well, at least the last part was almost certain. From inside of the inn, Garthon heard music. Someone was playing a harp...

Naturally, the inn wasn't too crowded. Currently he saw about four people in the surprisingly small taproom. The first person Garthon looked at was a young woman sitting in a corner, sadly the only woman in the tavern. She was young, not bad looking, with long brown hair and apparently she wasn't a barmaid either. She wore plain clothing, a white shirt and brown pants, more befitting for a man and to her left lay a longbow. Next to her sat a man, more a boy, probably barely eighteen, but nonetheless handsome with brown hair, wearing clothes similar to the girl's. They were listening to the music of a harper a plain looking boy with light brown locks, who was singing along. Garthon knew that song and slightly smiled.

*"The Dornishman's wife would sing as she bathe with a voice that was sweet as a peach"*, the harper sang with a pleasant voice, perfectly playing his harp and Garthon looked at him. By the Drowned God, this man had to play for a king, not in this shabby inn! Naturally, not Harren. The king of the Isles and Rivers had no sense for music, except for the cacophonous screams of dying people. But the Gardener king was quite fond of music, as was the princess of Dorne. And she would likely even appreciate this song...

*"But the Dornishman's blade had a song of it's own and a bite sharp and cold as a leech"*, the harper continued and Garthon grinned for a moment. He remembered that dornish woman he once seduced. Unfortunately, she had a blade too and every time Garthon looked at the scar between his left eye and mouth, he remembered it's bite.

George stepped past him, pointing at one of the tables. "We should sit down", he said, looking at the woman with the longbow. She wasn't exactly a buxom wench, but she really wasn't bad looking. The girl caught him staring and gave him a short glare out of her genuinely pretty green eyes and Garthon suppressed a big grin as he saw George's face turning red. Only as he walked towards one of the free tables, he looked at the last man inside of the room. Oh shit... out of all people, why him?

The man was in his late thirties, a very tall man with dirty brown hair and a shaggy beard. His eyes were dark, not quite the almost black colour which was typical for a Hoare, but still darker than most. He was muscular, probably close to Torvin in build, was armed with a longsword and wore a simple armour. On his chest, Garthon saw the emblem of House Hoare. And even worse, he knew this man.

Garthon never wanted to be a traitor, he was only in this out of loyalty to Torvin. And he was able to understand the Riverlord, all of them actually, from Tully to Lord Blackwood, who had nothing but disdain for the Ironborn, to the overly cautious Lord Bracken. He was even able to understand the Sons of the Trident in some way. But he would never understand a Riverman who would betray his people only to build himself a home in Harren Hoare's backside. Velmont Redloon was a man like that, a Riverman whose cruelty managed to surpass that of many Ironborn. And he knew him and looked at him, with a smile befitting of a traitor, befitting of a fish who tried to be iron.

"Breaker!", Velmont exclaimed, causing the man and the woman to look up. "Garthon Breaker! How do you end up in such a shitty inn?" Velmont actually tried his best to sound friendly, which was never a good sign. Garthon couldn't even pretend to ignore him. Ignoring Velmont was like ignoring a dragon. Probably a bit less deadly, but still similarly impossible.

*"As he lay on the ground with the darkness around and the taste of blood on his tongue"*, the harper continued the second verse of his song. Velmont gave the man a short glare.

"Fucking bards. I know why Harren usually ends up beating them to death with their own instruments", he growled before shouting in the direction of the man. "Hey, you hear that Harper? If I take a shit right now, it would still sound better than you!"

The harper gave no answer, albeit he stopped playing for a moment. The young man listening to him on the other hand stood up from his chair, which caused the woman to grab him by the hand. "Don't do that, Jared", she hissed, trying her best to ignore Belmont. Like most people, she failed at that, giving him a nervous glare, to which Belmont answered with a lecherous smile. Garthor couldn't resist to give him a slightly angry stare. "What are you doing here?", he asked.

"I think I asked first, Breaker", Belmont answered. Ah, now that was something Garthor was good at. Lying to a stupid iron fish. Considerably calmer, he gave Belmont his most convincing smile. "That boy here is George, he's a friend. His mother lives in Maidenpool and recently got quite sick, so we're going there", he lied through his teeth and hoped that George was at least able to convincingly lie. The boy could hardly look away from the young woman and Belmont gave him a grin. "You should buy him a whore. Last person I've seen looking at a girl like that, was Harmund Hoare after two weeks without a cunt", he said with the charm of a shark and the tact of a stillbirth. Both, George and the young woman heard it and gave him a cold glare, but in George's case, embarrassment was added to it.

"Anyway, I'm on my way back to Harrenhal. Have some good bad news for our king", Belmont started to explain. "Trymon Brune is dead, the Dyr Den without a lord, the killer on the run. His eldest son will travel to Crackclaw Point and he will be a better lord than the old fishfucker ever was. Though I have some second task..." He stopped and looked Garthor in the eyes, his stare suddenly filled with feigned anger as he grabbed him by the shoulders. "What?", Belmont shouted, leading to the three other guests looking at him with shock. "You think I haven't noticed the look in your eyes?"

George put his hand at the hilt of his sword and Garthor gave him an alarmed look.

"George, don't...", he hissed as Belmont pulled him closer. "We need to talk... outside", he whispered and began dragging Garthor to the door, looking at the woman. "What? What are you looking at, bitch?", he shouted at her. Garthor didn't put up more resistance than necessary. He knew, Belmont was stronger than him. And the way he acted was... odd to say the least. He planned something. Whenever Belmont Redloon planned something, Garthor had a bad feeling.

George followed them outside, his sword still half drawn. "Garthor, shall I kill him?", he asked and despite being slightly afraid of Belmont, Garthor managed to roll his eyes. Killing Redloon? Cute...

Belmont pulled him closer. "Listen, Garthor. I think these three in there might be Sons of the Trident. From what I've heard from their talks, their names are Jon, Jared and Dacey. You know, like in Jon the Harper, Jared Hunter and Dacey Longbow", he hissed and Garthor gave him a startled nod. These names were indeed names of some members from the Trident outlaws. He had heard of them before, but he had also heard that they were people he didn't want to mess with. "Alright then... we will simulate a fight now. I will punch you a few times, pretty light, but you will punch me too. Don't break my nose though, or else I'll get angry. You'll get inside there and start to curse me, curse the king and curse all Ironborn. Pretend to be a Rivercunt. Win their trust. And come back to me and tell me everything. The king will be pleased, with us, for finding and eliminating three Trident fuckers. And I could

also help you whenever you need me. Deal?”, he asked. Garthon looked at him as if he had lost his mind. From what he knew about Velmont Redloon, he might had.

“You want me to punch you, just so that I can win the trust of three possible outlaws?”, he asked and Velmont gave him a short nod. “Exactly. Listen, we might get only one chance to get the three of them, so do what I say or it will have consequences for you”, he growled and Garthon knew that he was indeed serious. It was crazy, but he saw some good sides as well. He always wanted to punch Velmont Redloon. And the girl wasn't too bad looking, for a possible outlaw. Maybe this evening could get quite entertaining after all...

**[Don't hold back - Break his nose]**

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### **Jenna**

You just arrived here. You haven't seen your kids all day. Go, check after them. I'll be right back”, Jenna said, ignoring the dizzy feeling in her head. It had been a long day and she still wasn't sure if she had done the right thing. Trusting Septon Corbin... maybe she had done a good thing. Maybe this would ensure Harris downfall should something happen to her. Or maybe she just tied her own noose with that... Jenna couldn't even pretend to be brave in that case. She was only a timid girl, trying to stay alive. Trying to do the right thing. Just like now. Carma deserved to stay with her family. Even though it wasn't much, her father would have been proud. Would be proud...

Jenna closed her eyes, the dizzy feeling gone, replaced by the sadness she was used to.

She felt Carma giving her a hug. “I'm so glad you said that”, her friend whispered. “I'll prepare a nice meal while you're gone. Don't take too long, or else it might get cold”

She smiled as she hear this and stood up. Her father wasn't a good cook and the meals servants got under Lady Halla where hardly enough to satiate anyone. Her mother had been a good cook, the rare times where they actually had enough to eat. Fond memories... Right now everything was collapsing around her. Maybe fond memories where the only thing she could cling to. Maybe that was all that would be left, one day.

As she left the room, she saw Urid sitting at the table, giving her a big smile. “I've heard what you just did”, he told her. “Carma is a good person. She would have gone for you and I know that you are tired. But... I want to thank you for declining her offer. We don't have much time as a family because of her work, but it's... it's important for the kids. And it means a lot”

Jenna gave him a smile before leaving.

Yes, she had done the right thing. Her father will be proud as soon as he'll hear this. Once Harris guards found him, she would make sure to tell him everything that happened. The good. The bad. How she tried to be brave. How she horribly failed when facing a monster. And how she just gave a family a lovely evening together. Perhaps, Jenna even felt a bit proud. With a considerably easier feeling, she left the Strad's house, stepping into the cold evening. The sun was almost gone, only a thin red line remained on the horizon, slightly above the Sunset Sea. One more time and then she would be gone from that horrible castle, that horrible housekeeper and that monster of a lord. A new beginning...

The way back to the castle was easier and shorter than she thought. The building had always intimidated her, from the very first day where she started working there. It was hard work, even harder thanks to Lady Halla tormenting her. But it was work that helped to support her father. If only she would have been able to help her mother as well...

The gate was guarded by a vaguely familiar looking woman. Jenna remembered, she had seen her in the castle a few times, she even met her briefly after talking to Septon Corbin.

The woman had light brown hair that fell to her shoulders, as well as brown eyes. She was quite pretty, not the kind of pretty people would describe Jenna with, but more the kind of pretty that actually managed to turn heads. Right now, the woman was looking at her, narrowing her eyes for a moment before recognizing her.

"You are Jenna Harking, right?", she asked and Jenna was surprised that the woman actually knew her name. She gave her a shy nod and the woman gave her a slight smile.

"Lord Harris told us that you have a day off. Forgot something before sneaking away, huh?", she asked with a chuckle, while Jenna gave her a terrified stare. "What?", she answered and noticed how weak her voice sounded. "I... never intended to... to sneak away... I'm spending the night at Carma Strad's house... I don't want to..."

The guard shook her head. "Easy now. I was making a joke. Seven Hells, I'm not good with that", she answered and patted Jenna on the back. "My name is Nora Recton. I've seen you around a few times" Jenna gave her a relieved smile. "I forgot something from my quarters", she said and Nora gave her a nod. "It's okay. Just go inside and don't take too long. It's your free evening after all. I can guess you don't want to spend it inside of that castle, after all that happened, I mean", she said and for a moment Jenna's smile faded as she remembered Ser Ilhan. "I'll be right back", she proclaimed and started to walk away, but turned around as Nora called her again. "Jenna!", she shouted and Jenna turned around. "Just wanted to say that Lord Harris ordered me and a few others to look for your father tomorrow. We'll bring him back, I promise" Something in her voice made Jenna believe her and her smile returned. With a thankful nod, she turned around again and walked towards the tall building the servant's were living in. For a short moment she narrowed her eyes as something on the wall caught her attention. For a moment she thought she saw two figures up there... must have been the guards, even though they rarely patrolled that part of the wall.

As Jenna entered the building, she slowed down her steps. Maybe this would be the last time she would walk down these hallways. And even though it hadn't been easy for her, this had been her life for years. Years of her life which she spent cowering in fear of simply everyone. Lady Halla, naturally. Ser Ilhan, before she realized what a man he had been. Even Harris, who had always been kind to her, until he... She had been afraid, she had been a timid little girl. Some part of her still was. But some part of her was something else, some part of her had finally picked up a sword. And one by one, she would start killing her monsters with it.

She reached her room without problems. This had been part of her home, after all, for all these years. She would have been able to find it blindly. For one moment, before entering her room, something caught her attention again. Was there someone standing behind that corner? No, no that would be ridiculous. Just her being a worthless coward again. But she didn't want to be a worthless coward anymore.

As relaxed as possible, Jenna walked down the hallway and entered her room. For a short moment, she paused, looking at the belongings she had to leave behind. Nothing of it was of any value, at least not material. But some of these things had been with her for years. Yet, she only came for one thing, the one thing she couldn't leave behind. As she looked on the ground, she quickly saw it. Her mother's wedding ring... a simple piece, nothing special, but a relic, a fond memory of good times, where everything had been easier. She reached down to pick it up and in this moment she heard a sound she didn't want to hear. Her door got opened...

She twirled around, facing a man just a few steps in front of her. He had a scarred face, with bedraggled blonde hair and he was wearing a long brown overcoat. His smile sent shivers down her spine, but his eyes were even worse. They were dead, pale grey, without any emotion in them, except for one. Joy...

"Hello, Jenna", he hissed and came closer. As she opened her mouth to scream, he shook his head. "Don't do that. I'll kill you if you scream. And I would hate to kill you soon" He came closer again and she tried to fall back, quickly reaching the end of her chamber. "You are such a sweet girl... Shame that your father can't be here to see what I'll do to you", the man growled. "You know, we have a score to settle. And since that worthless bitch Kersea spared him..." As she gave him a shocked stare, he started to laugh. "Oh, yes, your daddy is alive, for now. He will outlive his precious daughter, but not for long, oh no... If you want to do something, always do it yourself!"

With these last words, he jumped at her and delivered a swift punch to her face. Jenna fell down, the man on top. "Don't resist! I will hurt you more if you do... Oh, wait! Resist! Come on, put up a fight. Show me that you're better than the last one", he shouted and pulled out a knife. She didn't fight back, at least not as much as she wanted. She was afraid, too afraid. Only as the knife came closer, Jenna started to react. She tried to grab his arm and for a moment she was surprised how thin he was. But he was strong, stronger than he looked and the knife still came closer. "You are too pretty", the man hissed. "I'm going to change that before you die" And despite her trying her best to push back his arm, the knife slowly touched her cheek. She felt a sharp pain and she screamed as it slightly cut the flesh on her face. "Yes!", the man screamed. "Scream a little more for me!" She felt warm blood running down her face, mixing with tears. Tears of pain. Tears of sadness. Tears of rage.

*No! This was not how she would die! Not here! Not to him! Not today!*

The blade cut deeper, leaving the left side of her face in sheer agony, but the pain filled her with anger, years of suppressed anger. Anger at Lady Halla, for everything she put her through. Anger at Harris, for killing one of the best men she ever met. And finally, anger at herself, for being a worthless and timid little girl! And the knife stopped cutting, as the man's eyes widened. She held his arm firmly gripped, refusing to let the knife cut any deeper. But she knew, if she would try to fight back, he would have the opportunity to cut again... gods the pain... why wouldn't it stop burning?

**[Try to claw him in the eyes]**

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### **Lucas**

"We should bring him to the king", Lucas decided. He had thought about this. Harris wasn't a real option, at least not for him. The man tried to hide Lord Raylan's last will and Lucas could only guess how far he would go to ensure Dairon's silence. Of course, Harris was a knight and Lucas was usually inclined to trust fellow knights. But he wouldn't take any chances with Dairon. Lord Hightower was similarly dangerous, not for Dairon, but for Raylansfair. No, the king would be their best option.

Leonard seemed to have a different opinion on this. "The king?", he said with disdain.

"Flowers, that's a stupid idea and you know it. We won't come close to meet him. I have family at court, yes, but it will take them a long time until they manage to give us an appointment with the king. They aren't exactly members of his council" He shook his head.

"And even if we manage to tell the king our story, what would stop him from telling Lord Hightower about all of this?"

"Nothing", Lucas answered. "But it's not our call to make. The king has to decide here. And if he decides to favour Hightower, it shall be" Leonard gave him a grimace. "Seven Hells, you should hear your words", he answered. "Loyalty to the king is a good thing, but we don't bring any harm to the king if we don't tell him about Dairon and the will, right? Harris might not be the ideal lord, but he is just, he cares for Raylansfair and he is better than Lord Hightower. We knights won't notice it, but the smallfolk will have problems if Hightower becomes our lord"

Lucas narrowed his eyes. "That's why I don't go to Hightower, Leonard. The king has to decide and sooner or later, the king will decide. Do you stand against me in this matter?", he asked. During their travels, he started to like the other knight. He and Leonard had their differences, sure, but he also saw the man's finer qualities. Still, friend or not, honour would always come first for Lucas. And his honour commanded him to let his king decide. "I don't stand against you, Flowers", Leonard answered, much to Lucas relief. "I don't like it and should the smallfolk suffer because of your decision, I will hold it against you. But I don't stand against you"

Lucas gave him a short smile. "I'm glad to hear that. We have to work together in this city, if we want to have a chance of finding Dairon", he said. "So, have you ever been to the Citadel?"

Leonard gave him a light nod. "Once, during my second visit to Oldtown. I was making a short errand for Maester Eaton. And, I can tell you, it wasn't a pleasant experience. The Citadel's historical faculty is a horrible place for someone from Raylansfair" As he noticed Lucas' expression he started to chuckle. "The Maesters there hate us, mainly because we are the ones who actually write history. Archmaester Quent is probably the worst of the bunch. Quent the Historian they call him. Never met him, but as far as I know he's almost history himself, probably around eighty years old. And he has a grudge against Raylansfair" "Has he ever done anything that would harm you during your visit to the Citadel?", Lucas asked. Leonard started to smile. "Like what? You've listened to me, have you? The man is over eighty years old. What can he do to harm me?", he answered. Lucas shrugged. "I don't know. Interfering in your business, or stuff like that. I just want to be prepared for everything" "Well, he probably ensured that the historians at the Citadel, maybe even all of the Maesters and acolytes in that building were less than helpful to me. But he never tried to attack me, if that's what you mean", Leonard explained, before letting out a sigh. "Still, the man is not our friend. For all I know, he and Eaton could have some sort of dispute. Maybe the late Maester used to be a bully during his time as an acolyte"

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Eaton? He was the kindest man I've ever met", he said and Leonard shrugged. "Yes, but a grudge like that doesn't come without a reason, trust me. I mean, I can understand that Quent is not a friend of Raylansfair, considering that we basically make a mockery out of his position and that we had done so for the past two thousand years or longer. But the sheer hostility I experienced in these rooms... there is something more behind it, something personal. And whatever it is, let us hope we don't have to cross Quent's path", he explained, taking a sip from his beer. "That man is not our friend and probably never will be. He can't harm us physically, but he can be more than a nuisance"

Leonard was right, of course he was. The historians of the Citadel had a long rivalry with the archivists of Raylansfair. They generally sent their worst maesters to Raylansfair, in case the castle needed one. Maester Eaton had been no difference. Known as a troublemaker, not



overly smart, with a reputation to rather chase after girls than studying. Yet, he had proven himself to be the best Maester Raylansfair had in centuries. Every Archmaester of the Citadel's historic faculty continued the hostility between Raylansfair and Oldtown. Still, there was something on Lucas mind, something that made no sense. "But, Eaton was a wise man. He did what was best for the city, right?", Lucas said and Leonard gave him a curious look. "What are you implying?", he answered.

"If Archmaester Quent really has some personal grudge against Eaton, against Raylansfair, why would Dairon specifically seek him out? It makes no sense!", Lucas explained. Leonard was silent for a moment. "I'm afraid we'll find out soon enough. If things get the worst, we have to meet the Historian. And then you can ask him personally. Just, don't expect some polite answer from him", he finally answered.

Lucas looked out of the stained window, out into the night. Had he really made the right choice? He had never met the king, but his brother did. Petyr wasn't too thrilled about him, which was probably a good thing. Lucas tended to like people Petyr disliked. Of course, Leonard was right when he said that it would be tough getting an audience with the king. But Mern Gardener was known as a just man and a good king. And it was his duty to decide, his honour, not Lucas', not Leonards, not Harris'. And maybe he was the only man who was able to find the truth in this web of lies.

"So... tomorrow's a big day, huh?", Leonard said, looking up from his beer. "What do you want to say?", Lucas answered. "Well, we have to plan our steps here. Just going in, grabbing Dairon and riding to Highgarden won't work. We need a plan" Lucas gave him a nod. "Agreed", he answered. "Do you have any suggestions?"

Leonard looked towards the door that lead to the rooms in the second floor. "I think we both agree that Lunett can't come with us", he said. "Regardless of the fact that she fucked us over..." His voice got sharper and Lucas gave him a stern look. "I mean...", Leonard continued, his voice slightly softer again. "Regardless of that, it's too dangerous. She's safer in here. I still plan on bringing her back to that blasted inn once we're done here", he continued.

Lucas gave him a nod. "I agree. She wants to see the Citadel, but maybe she gets some other chance", he said and Leonard chuckled. "I doubt she ever wants to see Oldtown again. You saw that look on her face while we went through that city. Not only sadness over what she did, but also disappointment. The look many have when seeing the biggest shithole of Reach for their first time"

Leonard's words slightly surprised Lucas. "I thought you were ignoring her", he answered and Leonard slightly chuckled. "Guess I'm not half as good at ignoring someone than I thought", he answered and took a deep gulp from his ale. "Luckily her father's inn lies on the road to Highgarden. I'd hate to take a detour for her"

Lucas took another gulp from his ale, finishing it before clearing his throat. "So... anything else?", he asked and let out a yawn. It had been a long day and from what it looked like, tomorrow wouldn't be any better. Right now, he was longing for a warm bed.

Leonard finished his ale and gave him a grin. "Tired, eh? Well then, you go to sleep, I'll stay here for a while longer. Can't hurt to learn a bit about the current situation in Oldtown from one of the locals", he said and Lucas nodded thankfully before standing up and starting to walk to his chambers.

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He awoke to the sound of someone banging at his door. "Get up, Flowers, you've slept long enough!" Now, that was Leonard's voice for sure. Lucas quickly started to put on his clothes, before opening the door. The other knight was already in his armour and to Lucas' surprise, he also carried his longsword with him. "You're expecting trouble?", Lucas asked.

Leonard gave him an annoyed snort. "I'm expecting that you'll have trouble if you don't hurry. It's almost noon, for fuck's sake", he hissed. "And don't forget your sword. It can never help to demonstrate strength when dealing with these Maesters. And be prepared for the worst..." With these words he turned around and started to walk down the hallway. "Fucking hurry, Flowers. I'll meet you downstairs"

He disliked that idea. The Citadel would already dislike them enough. But Leonard was right. They had to be prepared for the worst. As fast as he could, he started putting on his mail shirt and the tabard depicting the sigil of House Raylan on top. Lastly, he grabbed his sword. With a very uneasy feeling, Lucas stepped out of the room and walked down the stairs. To his surprise, Lunett was sitting on a chair next to Leonard and apparently in a very good mood. The knight just laughed at something she said, but looked up as Lucas approached. "There you are, Flowers!", Leonard exclaimed. "Kept me waiting, but at least you've been smart enough to wear some sort of protection"

Lucas gave him and Lunett a curious look, to which the girl responded with a bright smile. "I just wanted to wish you the best of luck today", she said. "Me and Leonard came to an understanding" As she said that Leonard shook his head. "Understanding would be a bit too much here, girl. But there is no point in staying mad at you forever", he answered and Lunett smiled at him. "Good enough for me", she said.

"So, Flowers... ready to pry an acolyte on the run out of an evil old Archmaesters claws?", Leonard asked. Lucas gave him a short glare. "Stay serious, Len", he answered and Leonard shrugged. "Hey, the whole situation is bad enough already. Let me have my fun now, because I certainly won't have any when dealing with Quent" But he did him the favour and stood up, ready to leave, his face stern and determined. "No matter what happens today, I'll have your back, Flowers. I might not like the direction you're taking with Dairon, but I will have your back", he promised. Lucas let out a relieved sigh. Leonard had proven to be a valuable ally and without him, things would be harder for sure.

"And Lunett...", Lucas started to say, when the girl gave him a surprising hug. "Despite what you might think of me, I thank you for bringing me here", she said and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek. "That's for good luck", she giggled as Lucas gave her a surprised look. This took Lucas slightly off guard and before he could say anything, Leonard started to speak. "What? He gets one and I don't? Yeah, yeah, I get it, I don't need any good luck, right?", he said with a big grin.

"I figured you have enough luck already, Ser Leonard", Lunett said, but nonetheless she bent forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek too. Leonard's grin got even wider. "Hey, Flowers, I changed my mind. Taking her with us was a good idea", he said, before giving a surprised Lunett a light hug. "Don't do anything stupid, like going out there on your own, okay" The girl nodded in agreement, before giving Lucas a smile and taking a bow. "Good luck, sers", she said before walking off. Lucas looked after her for a moment, until Leonard gave him a playful smack on the back of the head. "You can stop grinning like a complete moron now, Flowers", he hissed.

They walked outside and Lucas took a deep breath. Leonard was still grinning at him as they walked down the alleyway. Naturally, the other knight took the lead, but Lucas would have

been able to find the Citadel on his own. The building was a complex of towers and great halls, each of them in the size of smaller castles, connected by huge bridges. On top of these bridges, whole streets were located, containing houses for the acolytes. The Citadel alone was larger than a small city and probably richer than quite a few Reachlords. And even though the Hightower was the dominating building in Oldtown, the Citadel couldn't be missed.

"Like I said, you can stop grinning now. What are you, a boy who just got it's first kiss?", Leonard said with a sly smile. Lucas gave him a short glare. "I'm not grinning!", he insisted. Leonard started to laugh and shook his head. "You can't see it, but you're blushing", he said and Lucas gave him a startled look. He wasn't blushing, was he? Sure, Lunett was a sweet girl. She was pretty, with her soft brown hair and her deep blue eyes. During the past week, he started to like her, yes, she even managed to make him laugh, but... well, maybe he was smiling, but blushing?

"What's it to you, *Lenny*?", he said with a sore voice. Leonard's laughter got even brighter.

"No need to get all defensive, *Flowers*", he said with a wide grin. "You're not the first knight who fancies a pretty smallfolk girl. And technically you're not that high above her. Go for it!"

Lucas narrowed his eyes. "I'm *not* fancying her!", he said, perhaps a little bit too fast.

Leonard's smile vanished, replaced by a smirk. "You know I don't appreciate it if people lie to me", he chuckled. Lucas did not answer, instead he looked up at the Citadel complex. He wasn't blushing, right? Seven Hells, he wasn't blushing!

The front gates of the Citadel were always open during the day, flanked by two giant statues depicting eastern sphinxes with the bodies of lions, the wings of eagles and the tails of serpents. A lot of people had business there. Merchants who were buying or selling their goods. Beggars. A multitude of supplicants. And to Lucas chagrin, he immediately saw a few men of dubious looks, likely smugglers, providing the Citadel's main source of income.

Behind these gates, Lucas stepped onto one of the largest courtyards he had ever been.

The area was crowded, full of acolytes, young men who proudly presented the links of their maester's chain they have already completed. Leonard didn't stop, instead he quickly lead Lucas to a large tower, one of the largest in the whole complex, a large tower with a copper spire. Lucas remembered what the old Maester in Darkdell had told him once. Each link in a maester's chain was forged out of a different metal and depicted one of the Citadel's faculties. The black iron chain link was common with almost every maester, standing for ravenry. There was a silver link for healing, a bronze link for astronomy and, albeit few Maesters actually tried to study this dead art, the Valyrian steel link, standing for a theoretical understanding of magic. And then there was copper. History.

No acolyte tried to stop them, but quite a few of them gave Lucas and Leonard a surprised, maybe even alarmed look. It was likely the first time they had actually seen knights of House Raylan. But the looks some of the older maesters gave them sent shivers down Lucas spine. No, they weren't wanted here. Still, nobody was foolish enough to stop them now.

Leonard lead him into the tower and Lucas was surprised to see that it was huge from the inside. Sure, it had been just as huge from the outside, but it appeared more like a castle than, well, a tower full of historical books. Every acolyte and maester inside of this tower wore a copper chainlink and everyone gave them a hostile glare when noticing their tabards.

"So... where do we go now?", Lucas asked. "You know where Quent's chambers are?"

Leonard shook his head. "I have no idea...", he mumbled. "But we will find out" With these words, Leonard started to walk through the entrance hall of the tower, nearing a staircase.

From his left side, Lucas saw a muscular acolyte approaching. "Leonard...", he hissed and the other knight stopped walking, instead looking at the acolyte. "Greetings...", Leonard started to say, but he was cut off by the acolyte.

"Greetings my ass, Raylan knight", he growled. "Say what you want and leave" He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes, while Leonard put up his most charming smile. "Well, I'm afraid that's not possible", he answered. "You see, we need to talk to Archmaester Quent" The acolyte shook his head. "No fucking way. The Historian does not want to talk to you", he answered, his look pure hostility. Instead of getting provoked, Leonard simply smiled a little bit more forced. Lucas saw the knight putting a hand on his purse. "Oh, I am sure he wants to talk to us. And these...", he started to pull out a few golden coins. "These hands want to talk to you"

The acolytes face changed in an instant. The frown vanished, replaced by a big grin. "I am sorry, sers. For that sum, the Archmaester is expecting you. Go up the stairs, all the way to the top. But I have to warn you, he has a secretary. One of the unbribeable kind", he said with a sly tone in his voice. In an instant, his behaviour changed, from hostile to openly generous. Leonard gave him a friendly nod. "Thanks for the help, good man", he said, before walking towards the stairs.

The walk upstairs was probably one of the hardest in Lucas life. Sure, he had walked long stairs before, but never before a stair like this. It was long, narrow and surprisingly dark. Several times, Lucas asked himself how an old man like Quent was even able to walk these stairs down. Perhaps he wasn't able. Perhaps he hasn't left his tower for years.

After a few minutes of silent walking, Lucas and Leonard arrived in a small chamber, containing little more than a desk and a second door, a door consisting entirely of copper. An old balding man, maybe in his sixties, was sitting at the desk and gave them a sharp look. "The Historian does not want to be disturbed", he hissed, giving them a cold glare as he noticed the tabards. Leonard stepped forwards, immediately pulling out a large number of coins. "I am sure he wants to talk to us", he said and the old man shook his head again. "And I am not interested in your money, Raylan knight", he growled. "Leave now, or wait until the Archmaester has time for you... which could take a few hours. Or days. Maybe even months" Lucas gave Leonard a glare, that turned into a shocked gaze as he saw something hanging next to the old man. A coat, a simple brown coat. Of course, these coats weren't anything special... but Dairon had always worn a coat like this. He was here! Leonard saw the same thing and his eyes narrowed as he stepped towards the old man. "Listen!", he growled. "The boy who owns this coat, where is he?" To Lucas horror, the knight put a hand on his sword and the secretary got pale. "I...", he stuttered, before pointing at the door. "But you can't go in there! The Archmaester is talking to him, he does not want to be disturbed"

Leonard shook his head. "I don't fucking care. I have waited long enough!", he said but looked at Lucas. "Are you coming? I don't think we can make a good first impression on Quent, so manners don't matter anymore. And I am sick and tired of these historians and their bullshit. They won't hide Dairon from us!"

**[Storm into Archmaester Quent's chambers]**

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## **Marak**

Well... how should he put that? Noelle... she wasn't exactly dangerous, right? That stuff with the fire... a well-placed fisticuff was still more dangerous than that. She wasn't exactly

dangerous, simply a little bit... "She's crazy", Marak said. "Completely deranged. Left her common sense in Braavos, or Asshai or wherever the fuck she comes from"

Ser Darren narrowed his eyes and Marak noticed that he had forgotten an important detail.

"But she's not dangerous!", he was quick to add. "Seriously, just don't look in her fire and there's nothing to worry about" The knight still did not look convinced. "Her... fire...", he muttered and Marak gave him a confident nod. "Absolutely! Don't look in her fire too long and there's nothing she can do", he said.

"And she's the crazy one", Ser Darren replied. Marak gave him a bright smile. "Exactly. She's the crazy one, while I'm the brains in our team", he answered. Marak knew, he wasn't exactly the smartest man in the kingdom. But compared to Noelle... "She's crazy, but she is not dangerous"

Ser Darren shook his head. "Let me be the judge of that", he said with a stern voice and was about to walk upstairs, when he paused for a moment. "One more thing, Marak" His face darkened. "I don't know what this priestess plans. But I have a bad feeling. I'm going to find out what she wants"

Marak noticed the tone in his voice. And he didn't like it. He knew that tone, it was one he often used himself, often in situations when he was close to break something. Something as tiny and fragile as Noelle's neck...

"What are you implying?", he growled and Ser Darren narrowed his eyes. "I won't kill her, take my word for it. But I want to find out what she is up to. And I can see, you want to know it too", he answered and Marak slightly relaxed. Yes, he wanted to find out what the priestess was up to. And as long as that knight wouldn't kill her, everything was fine, from his point.

"I'm watching you, knight", he hissed. "Don't do anything stupid. Don't kill her, don't hurt her, don't mock her rollmop"

Ser Darren let out a slight sigh. "I won't mock her rollmop, I promise", he mumbled. "Now bring me to your priestess" Marak gave him a nod. "Follow me then. And remember, don't look into the fire" The knight just gave him a cold glare and Marak's started to smile. "Or, you know what, look into the fire if it pleases you. But don't say I did not warn you"

With these words, Marak and Ser Darren started to walk upstairs, closer to Noelle's room.

Marak knew, she couldn't harm him, right? She would most likely be displeased with him bringing Ser Darren to her room. But pleasing Noelle wasn't his job. He only had to bring her to Raylansfair. And this knight looked like a good opportunity. At least if he wouldn't kill her first. But, why should he? Sure, she could be intimidating. Of course, Marak had never been intimidated by her! But he could see how cravens and easily impressed people could be afraid of her. Ser Darren seemed to be neither, so she wasn't dangerous or intimidating to him. Marak wasn't sure if that was something good or something bad.

The door to her room was closed, of course, but not unlocked. It was strangely warm as Marak approached it. She wouldn't start a fire in there, right? She wouldn't be that... oh, yes, crazy... "Okay, I will make an introduction. Stay calm", he said and Ser Darren gave him a short nod. The knight was wearing chainmail and Marak was sure that he must be uncomfortable right now. He opened the door and cleared his throat.

"Noelle, I want you to meet...", he started but stopped as he saw her. She was standing behind her brazier and, of course, she had been crazy enough to light it. The heat inside of the room was breathtaking, but the way Noelle looked at him was chilling. But the thing that really worried him were the flames. Instead of the slightly orange red he was used to, these

flames appeared to be green. The room was bizarrely illuminated, Noelle's slim figure throwing a grotesque, almost dancing shadow on the wall.

"Ser Darren Tallwood", Noelle mumbled and looked up, directly through Marak. He didn't even need to turn around to notice that Ser Darren slightly shivered as she looked at him. The green flames managed to highlight the green of her eyes, they appeared almost glowing, while her red hair and the red dress appeared almost black. "The fire told me" Her voice wasn't warm and soothing, but cold, burning cold. "And I am not pleased, *Marak*" Marak let out a gulp. Tricks. Shadows on the wall, strangely coloured flames. Illusionists in the Free Cities used tricks like these, Marak had seen them. Wildfire was green, surely there had to be a method to make normal fire appear green too without burning the whole tavern down.

Ser Darren stepped into the room, looking visibly uncomfortable. "Good evening, Ser Darren", Noelle said and her voice sounded warm again. "My name is Noelle of Braavos, a servant of R'hllor, the Lord of Light and one true god"

Ser Darren made a polite bow. "Ser Darren Tallwood, knight in service of House Raylan", he introduced himself and Noelle gave him a knowing smile. "You want to know why I am interested in House Raylan", she stated. He nodded. "Your interest is not hard to see, priestess. I just want to know why"

Her smile got a bit wider and she took a step closer. Ser Darren immediately put his hand on his sword. "Close enough", he growled and Noelle's smile vanished. "Of course", she answered. "I just wanted to make this easier. Look into the fire and you will see your answers"

Ser Darren seemed to be slightly reluctant, and to Marak's horror, he noticed that he was about to look into the fire himself. "Don't look into the fire, Marak!", Noelle ordered. Ser Darren looked into the fire, but only for a moment. Marak noticed that the knight gave Noelle a furious look, before kicking against the brazier, causing it to fall over. For a moment, Marak jumped back, certain that the whole room was about to explode. To his surprise, nothing happened. The strange green fire still burned, part of it inside of the brazier, part of it on the floor, though it was dying quickly, not even leaving a burn mark behind.

"I don't care for your games, priestess. I want to learn the truth and you will tell me without trying to bewitch me!", Ser Darren growled. He slightly drew his sword and Marak regretted that he left his axe in his room. Still, he clenched his fists, ready to take on this knight with his bare fists, if necessary. By the Drowned God, why would he do that? That was suicide and that weren't his thoughts for sure! Was she bewitching him right now?

"Nobody is trying to bewitch you", Noelle said and Marak was unsure if she was speaking to Ser Darren or to him. "The fire will only help me explaining it to you" She took a step closer and finally put a hand on Ser Darren's shoulder. "Do you think I could bewitch you?", she asked.

"Yes", Marak thought, but stayed silent. He was almost certain she had heard him anyway. Ser Darren shook his head. "There is no magic left in this world, priestess. Show me your tricks, your illusions, but don't count on me being impressed", he growled. Noelle's smile turned to a smirk as she reached into her sleeve, pulling her closed fist out and throwing whatever she held in it right onto the ground. Green flames started to burn again and Marak jumped a step backwards. "Please, Ser Darren. Look into the fire and see the light. There is nothing to fear. R'hllor is not fear. Fear is for the Great Other, fear is for the night, but not for the fire"

This time, Ser Darren looked into the fire. Marak fought against the urge to do the same. He even had to look away, though that turned out to be a bad idea. The shadows of Noelle, Ser Darren and even his own shadow, they were dancing and twirling, trying to lure him to look into the fire.

"You see it now?", Noelle asked and the flames started to burn down. Marak turned around and saw Ser Darren pale as a corpse. He knew that expression. He saw himself in a mirror after he looked into the fire. Poor bastard...

"What... was this?", Ser Darren asked. "Is this the future?" Noelle shook her head. "It is *one* future. The Red God shows several different outcomes. It is up to us to make his future happen", she explained. "Raylansfair... it... it was...", Ser Darren stuttered, his eyes widened. Noelle gave him a calm smile. "Yes. Burned to the ground. Green fire, Ser Darren. You've seen it"

Ser Darren did not answer immediately. Marak was about to clear his throat to end the awkward pause, as the knight continued. "How can I help, priestess?", he asked and Marak closed his eyes. A mad woman who managed to convince everyone that she was more than just a delusional illusionist. "I need to talk to the acting lord of Raylansfair", Noelle explained and Ser Darren answered. "We will travel to Raylansfair. Together. I will introduce you to the acting lord. It should be Ser Harris. He is a stern man, but he will listen to you", he answered. Noelle slightly touched his cheek. "You've seen *him*, right? The darkest shadow, the silver sun?", she asked. Ser Darren gave her a confused nod. "I did... Who was this shadow, darker than the night, with flames brighter than the sun? Who was this silver lord?"

This time, Noelle's smile seemed to be genuine, breathtaking and bright. "He is Raylansfair's salvation, the Chosen One of the Red God. And it's not 'lord', Ser Darren", she said and moved her mouth closer to the knight's ear. Still, Marak was able to hear every word and what he heard gave him shivers. It was a single, simple word, four powerful letters, a word that had little meaning to him before. But right now, in this moment, the way Noelle said it, this word meant everything for him.

"*King*", she spoke.

### **No Choices for this part**

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#### **Torvin**

"Let me go, or I will break his neck!", the prisoner shouted again. Holt shrugged, while Gabin gave Torvin a frightened look. Harlan was gurgling, clearly having problems to breathe with the chain around his neck. "D... do... something", he managed to utter. Holt looked at Harlan, a small smirk on his face. "And that is why you should listen to me, my prince", he said with glee, while Harlan gave him a glare, half fearful, half madly in anger.

Garthon would have talked. Garthon would have charmed the prisoner, convinced him that he would be released. Garthon had no problems with lying. But the only thing Torvin was good at was killing. Of course, it was a risk. It would have been a dangerous throw even without the possibility of killing Harren Hoare's thirdborn son. Torvin remembered the people in this dungeon, deprived of their humanity, everything taken away from them. He did not want to end like that. But not doing anything could be even worse for him. As silent as possible, he pulled out his knife. He had only one try.

"I will say it one more time: Let me go!", the prisoner screamed, looking furiously at Holt. Torvin took this opportunity to raise his knife. It wasn't a throwing knife, but luckily it wasn't a skinner's knife either. It was a butcher's knife, befitting for the butcher who ruled over this

dungeon. Torvin saw Harlan's eyes widen as the prince realized what he was about to do. And he threw the knife.

A gurgling sound was the first thing he heard, followed by a shocked gasp. The prisoner gave Torvin a horrified look and tried to say something. Instead of words, a gust of blood came out of his mouth. He looked down to the knife in his throat and went to his knees, pulling Harlan with him. The prince took this opportunity to escape from the dying man's grip, a furious gaze in his eyes. Looking at the prisoner, he ripped the knife from the man's throat and started stabbing him, in the face, in the chest, in the neck, over and over.

*"I! Am! Your! Fucking! Prince!"*, Harlan screamed, still stabbing the corpse, finally embedding the knife deeply into the fragments of the man's skull. He stood up, his arms, chest and face splattered with blood and he gave Torvin a smile, looking half like a madman and half like a monster. The look in his eyes was oddly aroused and as he came closer he looked at his trembling hands, his smile getting wider. "You almost killed me...", he mumbled.

With these words he pulled Torvin into a brotherly hug. "You mad bastard almost killed me!"

He started to laugh, a shrill, excited laugh "I can't believe you did that! You crazy son of a bitch, you almost killed me!" He let go of Torvin, still giggling like the madman he was.

"This.... this was the best thing ever!", he uttered, looking at Gabin. "Have you seen that, Gab? Have you seen how he just threw that fucking knife? I have felt it almost slicing my ear. I could feel his blood running down my neck, I felt his dying breath..." Gabin managed to give Harlan a bright smile. "I told you he is good, my prince", he said, giving Torvin an impressed stare.

Harlan looked at Torvin again. "Yes...", he mumbled. "Yes, but I had no idea HOW good he is! Breaker, my friend, my brother! In all my life I have never met such a sick bastard.

Throwing a knife at the man who could be your king one day! Harmund would have cut your fucking balls off! But I am different" His gaze hardened and he looked at Holt. "I am never ungrateful. Just as I don't forget anything" With these last words, his voice got deeper, a bit more growling. And without warning, he kicked Holt against the leg, the left leg. The torturer let out a surprised scream of agony and fell down. Torvin finally noticed the reason behind the man's limping. His left foot was missing, a crude iron prosthesis in it's place.

"You would have left me to die, right? I saw it in your eyes", the prince growled, stomping on Holt's head. "I would kill you for that, or even better, I would cut off your other foot and your hands as well and feed them to you. But I am not in the mood. You are probably the most lucky son of a fishfucking bitch I have ever seen"

With these words, he left the bleeding torture on the ground and gave Torvin a handwave.

"Now, Breaker! That was enough for me. I'll leave these fuckers to Holt. Drowned God, I don't want to hurt something. I want to fuck something and then I want to kill something and maybe fuck it again!", he exclaimed. "And I know just exactly where I can do that! Follow me! You will be rewarded. You will be rewarded like the highest of lords, like the proudest of captains. You will be rewarded as if you were my brother, just for one day!"

Torvin gave Gabin a curious look and Gabin answered with a slight nod. Fucking Hoares...

Torvin hated the expression in Harlan's eyes. That was real gratitude, but it was the gratitude of a Hoare. Nothing good would ever come from that. Nothing good, except maybe the opportunity to kill them all. But whatever Harlan had in mind, Torvin was sure he was going to hate it.

Leaving Holt behind, the three men started to walk back to the surface. Harlan was still shivering, his smile as bright as ever. A bit of blood was visible on his teeth and Torvin



noticed him licking his lips. "That was... incredible. I could have died today...", the prince said with a disturbing pleasure in his eyes. Torvin gulped. Maybe he should have left that man to die. Harren Hoares second best son...

As they entered Harrenhals courtyard again, Torvin noticed that the sun was about to set. They had been longer down there than he had imagined. Nobody was on the courtyard and it was silent, deadly silent. Torvin remembered an old raider's tale, about a raid on some southern island. The whole island was covered in a lush forest and the noise inside of this forest was overwhelming, the noise of birds and bugs and smaller creatures. But the raider mentioned one time when the whole forest went silent. When the whole forest was sensing a predator nearby. And right now, Harrenhals courtyard was like this forest. The silence was unnatural. And the predator stepped out of the shadows, walking closer towards Torvin. No introduction was needed for Torvin to make a genuflection. Gabe did the same as they both bowed their heads in respect and complete fear. The man was tall, taller than Harlan and taller than his father. He was wearing light armour, the sigil of House Hoare on his chest. His hair was black like his heart and he had a long beard falling down onto his chest. And his eyes... there were different shades of black. This man's eyes were even darker than his brothers, but Torvin also saw a lot of white in them, the pupils being smaller than he expected. Somehow, it managed to make his stare even worse. And the smile he had on his face was the embodiment of cruelty.

"Hello, brother", Harmund Hoare said. "Have you been playing in the dungeons again? Spoiling the meat?" Torvin saw the look in Harlan's eyes. He knew that look, he had seen it before. His salt wives had a look like that when they tried to be brave.

Harlan managed to smile at his older brother. "It's good to see you, Harmund. How was your journey?" Harmund Hoare let out a short growl. "Boring. The fishgirls have been terrible. Had no spirit. They *broke* too quick" With these words, he looked at Torvin. "What are you?", he hissed. Torvin managed to make a respectful bow again. "Torvin Breaker, captain of the Behemoth", he introduced himself and Harmund spat out. "One of my father's captains, huh?"

"He saved my life today, brother", Harlan said and gave Torvin a proud look. "He should accompany us. I want to give him all the girls you don't want. I can promise you, you have never met such a sick bastard in all your life"

Harmund gave him a glare and Harlan's smile vanished. "I have met you, brother. That's enough of a sick bastard for a whole lifetime" He looked at Torvin again. "Torvin Breaker... I know that name. They say you are not a man, but a little girl, too weak to be Ironborn"

Torvin wanted to say something, or even better, he wanted to kill that man. But he only gave him a nod. "Who says that, my prince?", he asked. Harmund took a step closer. "I say that. You want to prove that you are a man? Me, my brother and a few good friends will go through the Riverlands tonight. We will find us some fish to fuck and to kill, to celebrate my arrival in Harrenhal. You want to accompany us?"

No, he didn't. He wanted nothing to do with this beast, this beast that managed to scare Harlan Hoare. He was Harren's worst son by far, his father's spitting image, a mixture of violence, cruelty and cunning. Before he could answer, Harmund interrupted him. "Of course, if you are the little cunt I think you are... Greyjoy has called for his captains, about an hour ago. All of them. Apparently he wants to make some plans for the next step of the Rock invasion"

This took Torvin by surprise. "The Lord Captain?", he exclaimed. "I didn't know he was here..." Harmund looked up to one of the five towers. "He arrived with me. If you are rather his bitch than a true man, you are free to attend his *meeting of captains*. I won't stop you", the prince growled. Torvin let out a sigh of relief. Damon Greyjoy, the Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet wasn't as bad as Harmund Hoare. He was a polite man, he could even be charming. And if he called, it was Torvin's duty to follow. But the look Harlan gave him... the man practically begged Torvin with his eyes to go with them into the Riverlands, to rape and murder like they want to. It was the look of a man who didn't want to be alone with a monster... Could he leave him alone now, so close to win his friendship?

**[Go with Harmund and Harlan into the Riverlands]**

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## John

He didn't look at Janae. In this moment, he couldn't look at her. He only looked at Cass, saw the tears flowing down her face, the pleading look in her eyes. He hardly even noticed Bear behind her, holding her in his claws, ready to tear her throat out. But he noticed the warm tears running out of his eye, burning in the deep wounds on his face. John Gutten wasn't a religious man. The Old Way of his people had little meaning for a mercenary. He had travelled from Pyke to Asshai and everywhere he walked, people prayed to a different god or some sort of demon. He knew several hundred gods and demons, gods of war, demons of death, gods of love, demons of vengeance. Every religion claimed to have the true god. Gutten never cared for finding the true god, but right now he prayed to all of them.

"Yes...", he said and his voice sounded bleak. "Yes, I do remember the Qohorik" For a moment he closed his eye, only to open it again. No! He would not look away! Janae said nothing. Her bow made no sound as the arrow moved through the air, too fast for Gutten to do anything, too fast for Bear to cut Cass' throat. And it did not hit him in the head.

"No!", John exclaimed and for a moment everything seemed to slow down as he could only look on in horror. Janae's arrow went deep into Bear's shoulder, causing the man to let out a roar, half out of surprise, half out of anger. And he closed his hand, the hand he held around Cass neck, maybe out of reflex, maybe on purpose. Five tiny knives piercing the skin, clawing deep into her throat. Her eyes widened and a gust of blood left her mouth as she tried to scream. And John screamed, a desperate scream and burning with rage. He would kill this monster!

For one moment, Bear held Cass in his hand, watching her kicking him helplessly, gasping for air, struggling to stay alive as the blood was flowing out of her destroyed throat. Then he threw her away, like a piece of trash and right in front of John. Gutten went on his knees as Cass landed in front of him, barely seeing the expression of pain and utter terror on her face, his vision blurring from the tears in his eye. "Cass...", he muttered. "No..." She looked at him, the expression on her face hardening, almost accusing and she was piercing him with her eyes. John needed a moment to realize that she was dead. No... no, that could not be... that could not be his fault... he had ordered the shot... but... no, no, no! This could not be... And before he realized it, he was weeping and sobbing, desperately looking at Cass' dead body. He heard a cry of rage as Temari leapt forwards, intending to kill Bear. The bandit simply let out a roaring laugh, parrying a vicious strike with the plated armour on his lower arm. In return, he punched Temari in the side, the same side that had been targeted by the bandits earlier. Temari's cry of rage turned into a cry of pain, as Bear punched him in the side

again, before punching him in the face. Gutten looked down at Cass' body and then up at Bear, who was just kicking Temari in the kneecap, sending the mercenary down on the ground at last, stomping on his head. No... this man would not get away with it! He would kill him, here, now! He would kill him! For Cass...

Despite the pain in his face, in his chest and in his ribs, he jumped up in a single movement, charging at Bear. The bandit didn't even bother to draw his sword, he was simply smiling his cruel smile. Gutten raised his sword, swinging it in a desperate attempt to decapitate him. Deep down he knew, it wasn't a very good strike. He was slow, he was clumsy, he could hardly breathe and he was too angry to care. He would kill him, he would hack him to pieces, he would kill every single one of his men, they were all going to die, but this man would be the first!

Bear simply dodged his amateurish strike, quickly punching against his broken ribs. A sudden, terrible pain flashed through his body and Gutten almost went to his knees, the sword falling out of his feeble hands. He would have fallen too, if it weren't for Bear, who grabbed him, the knives in his gloves piercing his shoulders. Gutten screamed in pain, as Bear pulled him up, his feet leaving the ground, the knives digging deeper into his shoulder, scratching the bones, leaving Gutten in more physical agony than he had ever felt before. "You brought this onto yourself, John Gutten", Bear growled. "The only thing you needed to do was telling your bitch to drop her bow" His mouth formed a smirk as he pulled Gutten closer and for the first time John saw the facial features underneath the helmet. Bear was young, maybe in his mid-twenties. His skin was dark, like the skin from some people from Essos. His face was haunting, with a barbaric look on it and his brutal smirk sent shivers down Gutten's spine. "But you just couldn't let me go, right? You had to be the hero for once. You couldn't let me roam free, you just had to try it", Bear roared. "Or perhaps you didn't trust me. Perhaps you thought that this would be her only chance... well, John, I told you the truth. I told you I would kill your little whore and I did it. I am a man of my word"

With these words, he started to move his right hand, pulled the knives out of Gutten's bruised flesh and put the index finger on his shoulder. "But don't you worry, John. You won't miss her long" Bear looked up, over his shoulder. "You fucking bitch, don't you dare to shoot. I have your precious John as a shield. You want to kill him? Go on, shoot!", he roared.

Gutten closed his eyes. He knew what Janae was thinking. It was her arrow that caused Bear to kill Cass. It wasn't her fault, but he knew she was devastated regardless. And she wouldn't shoot Bear again, not while he used Gutten as a shield.

He felt the knife on Bear's index finger digging deep into his left shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain. The knife moved upwards, slowly, very slowly, causing a nagging pain, before leaving his flesh again. Gutten felt the knife pointing at his jugular. "You want any last words, John? Or do you want to die as a little bitch, crying in pain?", Bear growled. John closed his eyes. This was it. Maybe this was the price for all he did. For all the lives he had taken. Maybe this was some god's justice. But if this was justice, there would also be justice for Bear, one day.

"My men will kill you for that", John said. These weren't very good words, but they were the only ones he could think of right now. Vengeance. Janae would take vengeance. Temari would take vengeance. Samantha would take... Bear's laughter roared through his head.

"Men? What men? I count an unconscious fuck and a whore that tries to be a man. You think they cou..."

The laughter turned into a surprised grunt and Gutten opened his eye again as he felt the grip around his shoulder gone, as he slowly sunk to the ground, seeing his opponent turning around. Behind Bear's hulking body, a much smaller figure was visible. Samantha. She had embedded one of her hatchets deep in Bear's ribs and held the remaining hatchet with both hands. "He doesn't need any man", she hissed delivering a fierce strike against the surprised Bear's chest. "Not as long as he has me!"

A second strike hit him at the shoulder managing to make him stagger. "And trust me...", Samantha growled, striking him again. This time, Bear parried the hatchet's strike with the knives in his glove, albeit John saw him staggering another step back. She delivered a strike against his thigh, causing Bear to go on his knees. Even now he was taller than Samantha and taller than most men Gutten knew. Of course, her hatchet wasn't enough to break his armour, but it was enough to cause him pain, maybe even to break his bones. "I am...", she hissed

A strike hit Bear's arm as he tried to defend himself. This time she even managed to pierce the weak armor at his lower arm, giving him a nasty cut, maybe even breaking his hand. "...good enough...", she gasped out.

The next strike hit the shoulder at the same arm, causing Bear to grunt in disoriented pain. Samantha looked Bear straight in the eyes and even though Gutten could not see the face of the bandit, he was sure that the smirk was gone "...to kill you!", she screamed, taking another strike, this time against his face.

As she hit him, Gutten heard a satisfying crunch, heard Bear letting out a scream of pure agony, before falling backwards, Samantha jumping on top of him. Gutten knew, her hatchet wasn't enough to fully break his helmet and to crack his skull, but as she pulled it back to swing again, he saw blood on the weapon, the blood of a monster.

The monster wasn't defeated though. Bear moved both of his hands forwards, hitting her in the abdomen, causing her to drop her weapon in shocked pain. Bear jumped up now, punching her again in the stomach, grabbing her and delivering a fierce punch to her face, before throwing her on the meadow in front of the inn.

"*YOU FUCKING WHORE!*", Bear screamed out of the top of his lungs, his speech sounding slightly inarticulate. "*I'M GOING TO KILL YOU! YOU'RE DEAD!*" As he looked around for one moment, John saw the damage done by Samantha's hatchet. His helmet prevented her from hacking off his nose, but there was a large cut over his chin and lips, blood was flowing out and the bloodlust in his eyes would have been enough to make a dragon shiver.

John saw something flying through the air above him, as he desperately tried to get up again, to stay conscious. And Bear paused for a moment, his scream turning into a grunt. He looked down, seeing the arrow that pierced his upper leg, and turned around to notice Janae who walked closer, pulling out the last arrow in her quiver. In that moment, John realized that his enemy was far more intelligent than he looked like. He did not try to kill Samantha, he did not try to charge Janae. He ran, as fast as he could with his wounded leg, he limped towards the forest. "This is not over, John!", he screamed as Janae put her bow down, eyeing him furiously. "I will come back, I will burn you alive and I will rape your fucking corpses!" And then he was gone, vanished in the forest, leaving behind only the dead and the doomed.

Janae knelt next to John, looking at him with a worried look on her face. "John!", she shouted. "Fuck, stay with me John" Gutten looked past her into the taproom, looking at Cass' frail body. Blood was still flowing out of her destroyed throat and her last look at him, this accusing look, would haunt him forever.

"Samantha", he mumbled, looking to the meadow in front of the tavern. She was still conscious, trying to get back on her knees. Her cheek was cut up from the brutal hit and swollen, but her blue eyes looked at John with pride and she gave him a bright smile. "Told you I would not fail you", she whispered. "I brought Aylard and his family to safety, but I saw this... beast coming after you and I couldn't let you die, I had to do something" With these words, she fell forwards again, lying down in the meadow, shivering in pain.

Despite his agony, despite his sorrow, despite the hollow feeling inside of him, John gave her a kind smile. "Good girl...", he mumbled, before almost drifting away into unconsciousness. Janae put a hand on his shoulder, trying to shake him, but accidentally putting pressure on his wounded flesh. The sudden agony was enough to make Gutten jump forwards, almost punching her in a reflex, but it also caused the dizzy feeling in his head to go away. But not the pain. His face wasn't the worst, his shoulder neither. It was the feeling of loss, the knowledge that it had been his fault again. For once, he should have yielded. But Bear had been right. He couldn't just listen. He had to try it. That was him, a stubborn fool, filled with regret, doomed to lose everything, over and over.

He saw movement, people coming out of hiding. Aylard, pale from losing blood. Behara, holding a short sword, her stare worried beyond measure. She ran up to him, kneeling down, tears flowing down her face. "Tem... where's Temari?", she asked. Janae put a hand on her shoulder. "He lives", she simply said. "He fought bravely, Behara"

Before she could continue, Behara stormed inside, kneeling down next to her brother. Gutten heard her desperate sobs as she was weeping over Temari. Slightly limping, Aylard moved next to John, reaching down in an attempt to help him up, his face similarly worried. "Seven Hells...", he mumbled as he looked at him, his facial expression shocked. Gutten stayed silent. He knew the look in Aylard's eyes and he knew how he must look. And he knew it would hurt a lot more in a few hours.

"Cass...", Aylard started but stopped as Gutten shook his head. The innkeeper's eyes widened and he shook his head in disbelief, looking into the innroom. "No...", he mumbled. "No, no!" With these words he let go of John and ran into the innroom, where his loud screams of sorrow could be heard.

With Janae's help, John managed to stand up, ignoring his shaky feet, walking into the innroom. Temari was barely conscious, but managed to look at Gutten, his eye widened as he saw his face. Fuck, he really needed a mirror...

Aylard was holding Cass body, desperate tears flowing down his face and he looked at John, his expression a mixture of sorrow and anger. "You should have kept her safe", he hissed, not screaming for once. The calm tone of his voice was worse than his screams, it was pure desperation. "You should have kept her safe, she trusted you, she loved you" Every word felt worse than Bear's knives.

He wanted to answer something, wanted to defend himself, wanted to tell Aylard that he had tried his best, that Bear had killed her that there was nothing to do. He wanted to tell Aylard was right, that there was only one to blame, the one who ordered the shot, the kinslayer, a man who tried to run from his past, a man who ran to the edge of the world and back, a godless man, never escaping his demons. But he stayed silent. There was nothing to say about her. She was gone, just like that.

Janae answered in his stead, her voice sounding softer than usual. John expected her to lash out at the innkeeper, but she sounded almost kind. "I am sorry, Aylard", she said and the

innkeeper shook his head. "Sorry...", he mumbled. "Sorry! She was family! What do you know about family?"

For one moment, John saw the hurt look on Janae's face. "Nothing... But I know John is not to blame", she answered. Aylard gently lay the dead body in his arms down on the ground, looking at her softly, before his gaze hardened. "She was naive, she thought John would care for her!", he growled and looked at John. "You gave her false hope. You made her believe that anything you said was genuine!" And every word hurt more his wounds, because John knew Aylard had a point. He cared for Cass, he really did. But there was another voice in his head. It wouldn't have worked and he had known that from the very beginning. He only wanted someone to warm his bed at night, like always. Sure, at first her intentions had been similar. But he saw how she changed the way she viewed him. He saw it and did nothing. He should have let her down gently, she wouldn't have stayed back with him, she would have been alive!

"Aylard...", Janae said. "John fought like a..." She stopped for a moment. "Like a... lion... for her. He cared for her, Aylard, trust me. If you have to blame someone, blame me. I can deal with it. But don't blame John. He lost her, just as you did, Aylard" The innkeeper shook his head and tears were flowing down his face. "He lost a pretty girl he knew for two weeks. I've lost a brilliant young woman, with a wonderful heart, the big sister Lunett never had" As he mentioned his daughter, Aylard's face got even darker and Gutten felt a sting of regret. He looked up and saw that Samantha got up again, holding her stomach area, slowly walking towards him. Her eyes met his and despite the pain she obviously was in, she managed to look proud.

"How are you feeling, Sammy?", he asked. Samantha's attempted to shrug, but stopped in the middle of the movement, letting out a painful moan. "Could be better", she admitted. "I just puked some blood in that meadow. Hope nobody minds. Thought I should let you know" She sat down on a chair, still holding her stomach. "Seven Hells, that punch felt like a horsekick", she moaned. "At least I'm still prettier than you" A slight smile flashed across her face, but immediately vanished as she looked down on Cass.

Gutten shook his head as she opened her mouth. He knew what she wanted to say and he didn't want to hear it. She was sorry. Of course she was, they all were, they always were. But there was no need to be sorry for him. It was his fault. And he was the only one who had to live with that. He looked down at Cass. Another girl dead because of him...

"John", Samantha said softly. "I want to go after Lunett. I know you've made your point, but now I make mine. Your girl, Cass, she wanted it, she wanted it even more than I did. I know you don't like it, but I saved your life for fuck's sake! I think you owe me that one and I think you owe it to Cass. Don't make me beg for this, John"

Janae gave her a cold look. "You're considering this, John? Out of loyalty for your girl? Come on, that's... that's misplaced loyalty. Think about how much worse today would have been without Sammy", she warned him and John knew she was right. Samantha was right as well. It would be the least he could do for Cass. She wanted it. It wasn't exactly her last will, but it was close enough. "Would you judge me?", he asked, looking at Janae. She shook her head and her eyes got a sad look in them. "I would never judge you, John", she answered. "I can only advise you. Sending her away will be a mistake. Sure, she can keep Lunett safe, but who is Lunett to you? I'm sure Lucas and that other knight can manage without her. Besides, she's wounded. Can you even ride, Sammy?"

Samantha gave her an almost furious glare. "Trust me, even with a broken spine I would be a better rider than all of you combined could ever be!", she hissed. As if she wanted to prove, she tried to jump up, only to hold her stomach in pain. "It will probably be a slow ride. But I can do it. I'll bring her back. Please...", she said. "John, now is not the time for pragmatism. Aylard has lost enough. You have lost enough. I have lost enough. And I have enough of that. You kept me here and I was able to help, yes. But in the same time, who knows what happened to Lunett? Who knows what happened to Lucas and Leonard in the meantime. I see the look in your face. You blame yourself for her death and trust me, it won't get any easier if you keep being a stone-cold bastard about this"

This time, Gutten looked her straight in the eyes. "I don't need life advice from you, girl", he growled, but he knew that she was right. Cass' death was his fault, his responsibility. And if anything happened to Lunett or to Lucas it would be his fault too. Could he live with that? He was a beast, a godless kinslayer, a truly bad man, he knew he needed her here, she had proven it again today, and he knew Janae was right. And then there was the look in Samantha's eyes. The look that told him that she wouldn't accept a 'No' again. But would she go as far to abandon him for this cause? "Don't make me beg, John", she said again.

**[Respect Samantha's wish and send her to Oldtown]**

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## **Lucas**

No, he was done waiting. The Citadel mocked him and Leonard and they would keep them waiting for a long while, time they could use otherwise. He was done waiting, he wouldn't take any chances, not when Dairon was so close.

"Go ahead, Leonard. I'll follow", he said and the other knight looked quite pleased. "Good decision, Flowers. Let's see if we can get some answers", he answered. The old man jumped up, glaring at them furiously. "You can't do that!", he shouted and took a step towards Leonard, now standing between the knight and the door that lead to Quent's chambers. "You can't do that! The Archmaester does not want to meet you!"

Leonard let out a sigh and lay a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Trust me, I can. And trust me, I am not in the mood to wait for your amusement. We're going to let the Historian decide if he wants to meet us" Looking at the knight's weapon, the old man's facial expression changed. "You wouldn't dare...", he answered, but the look Leonard gave him silenced him immediately. "Want to find it out? No? Then step out of the way. We don't want to hurt your precious Historian, we only want to talk. And trust me, we will talk"

With these words, Leonard gave Lucas a nod and the old man stepped aside, pointing at the door. "Then enter. But the Historian won't tell you anything, not after disrespecting him like that!", he growled. Leonard simply shrugged and walked towards the door, not even bothering to answer. Lucas followed and felt a very uneasy feeling as he saw Leonard opening the door.

"Archmaester Quent, I pre...", Leonard started but stopped in the middle of the sentence, still standing inside of the doorway. "You fucking bastard...", he mumbled in complete shock. He finally stepped into the chamber, allowing Lucas to follow.

Archmaester Quent's chamber was huge for a single person and looked more like a library than a place where someone actually lived. The walls were decorated with maps, showing foreign places, there were countless large bookshelves, full with old and brittle paper. In the middle of the room there was a table, large enough for two dozen people. Right now, only

two men sat there. One of them was Dairon. The boy was pale, with a haunted expression on his face, looking at them in surprise. And in front of him sat... no... that...

He wore an elegant gown in the colour of copper, the large chain around his neck having the same colour. In front of him lay a copper rod and mask, symbols of his position. And he was...

"This is impossible...", Lucas managed to stutter. "Maester Eaton?"

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### **Richard**

He pointed the sword right at Alan's chest. "I can demand that from you and I will. You will help me in saving my daughter, or I will cut you down right now!", he growled, watching Alan starting to shiver. He wouldn't hurt him, he never would, not even after all the things Alan has done. But he needed his help. Alan was never someone who could be persuaded into helping with something. And he wasn't a brave man. Threatening him was probably the only way to get him to help.

"B... but...", Alan stuttered. "You wouldn't..." He let out a short scream as Richard took a step closer. "I will if you don't help me!", Richard shouted and Alan cringed. "But... I have no weapon. Please brother, don't do this to me!", he moaned. Richard rolled with his eyes. "We will find you a weapon", he said, walking outside of the room. Alan followed, far too afraid to run away.

Together they made their way to the shed, Richard going in front, a reluctant Alan following. "Take a look around", Richard growled. "They aren't real weapons, but they will be enough" Alan gave him a nervous look, before walking straight towards a pitchfork. "I'll take this!", he exclaimed and Richard raised a brow. "What? A pitchfork is basically a spear, right? I can keep my enemies on distance with it", Alan explained and Richard rolled with his eyes. Yes, that was Alan, a coward at heart. But he was good with words, good at lying and good at manipulating. If only they weren't related... Richard would kill him right here. But he would never be a kinslayer, he would never stoop so low.

In silence, the two brothers walked out of the shed. Richard was wielding a sword he could hardly use, Alan was wielding a farm tool he was even worse with. They were up against a violent killer. And then there were Wolfius' allies. The woman who nearly killed him. The other woman, the one who shot him. The man with the polite voice. Whoever they were, they seemed to be even more dangerous...

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They walked down the road, Richard still slightly limping. But every step filled him with anger, more anger than he ever felt. Even as his wife died, he felt more desperation than anger. This time... this time he felt like killing someone. He wondered if his father ever felt like this before a battle. The anxiety. The anger. The urge to kill.

They passed Jarow's bridge and for a moment, Richard was about to ask the old soldier for help. But a loud snort from underneath the bridge made him reconsider this. Jarow was likely passed out from his drinks again, sleeping a few hours before continuing to guard his bridge, just like he always did for the past twenty years. Richard felt a sting of compassion for the old man. He had saved his life and likely Jenna's too. He deserved more than this. Maybe Richard could help him, after saving Jenna. It was the least he could do for this man.

Soon after passing the bridge, Richard saw the castle in the distance. The sun was already about to set and a cold wind was howling over the road. He looked at Alan and noticed that his brother was at least as nervous as himself. Richard didn't want to kill him, he didn't even



want to endanger him. Sure, he wanted to knock out all his teeth, but Alan wasn't a man who deserved death. He wasn't evil, just greedy and selfish, never thinking about the consequences of his actions. No, very few people truly deserved death. Wolfius was one of them.

"So...", Alan cleared his throat. "I was thinking... If... I mean if we both survive this...", he stuttered, nervously looking at the castle. "And, I am pretty sure we both survive this. I mean, I'm too handsome to die and you... well... you have Jenna, right?" Richard let out a sigh.

"What do you want, Alan?", he growled.

"Well... now is probably a very bad time to ask this, but I could use some money. I wouldn't ask, you know, but...", Alan stuttered and Richard gave him an angry glare. "You're asking me for money?", he asked and Alan had the decency to look a bit sorrowful. "Just in case I survive and you die. I know, you have every right not to give me any money, that's just understandable, but I have a plans to invest in some things... I know this man in Highgarden and he knows someone who has good contacts to some merchant from Myr. He only needs a bit of money to get into business again and he could sell that fancy stuff from Myr, he could sell it to Oldtown, the other Free Cities, to Mantarys, he even has contacts to some Astapori merchant and he would only need a bit of money, so I was thinking..."

Again, Richard cut him off, this time by shouting. "No!", he exclaimed. "You got to be kidding me!" This time he was very close to just chop Alan's head off and his brother probably felt this, because he jumped away from Richard. "Hey, just asking. In case you can't tell me later, you know, this is a good deal, sure as winter. Come on, you have trust me...", he exclaimed. Richard shook his head. "I don't have to do anything, Alan, except saving my daughter", he growled.

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They arrived at the castle around the time it was almost too dark to see anything. The guard at the gate held a torch in his hand... no, in her hand. Richard was slightly surprised to see a female guard, especially one who was that young. The woman didn't look older than Jenna, her hair had a lighter shade of brown, her keen amber eyes where watching Richard and Alan approaching the castle. She was wearing armour, a bit too heavy to be part of the usual equipment of Raylansfair's guard. And unlike Richard, she looked like she was able to use the sword in her hand.

"That's close enough", she yelled as Richard was about ten feet away from her. He noticed that he still had his sword drawn and slowly put it away, before raising his hands. "Greetings, good woman", he started, a bit unsure what he should say now. She gave him a cold frown and before Richard could continue, Alan took a step forwards. "Good evening, mylady", he said and took an elegant bow. "My name is Alan Harking, this is my brother Richard. We're looking for my niece, Jenna", he said with his most charming tone. Richard noticed that the woman looked at him in surprise. "You're Jenna Harkings father, right?", she exclaimed. Richard gave her a short nod and the wary expression on her face vanished. "But... we wanted to search for you in the morning. People think you're dead! Where have you been in the past week?", she asked. Richard looked past her into the courtyard. "Can we talk inside? I need to talk to my daughter, she might be in danger", he mumbled and the woman's distrustful facial expression reappeared. "What danger are you talking about?", she asked coldly.

Alan let out a sigh and gave Richard a look that told him to be quiet. "No immediate danger, mylady...", he said and made a short break, looking at her. She raised an eyebrow. "Nora

Rector", she answered and Alan gave her a charming smile. "It's a pleasure meeting you, albeit the circumstances could be better. A woman of your beauty shouldn't be forced to stand guard at night", he said, which caused Richard to take a step forwards. "Alan!", he said harshly. "Listen, Nora, my daughter could be in danger" He bowed down and pulled up his trouser, revealing the bandages around his lower leg. "I was attacked, five days ago. The man who did this to me vowed to target Jenna next. I narrowly survived and now I need to warn her", he explained as brief as possible.

Nora shrugged. "I don't think a single man could get inside this castle without the guards noticing, but...", she stopped for a moment, apparently unsure what to say. "But I guess you should talk to your daughter and to Lord Harris. If there's a killer on the loose, he needs to know" She finally stepped aside, but raised her hand as Richard approached. "I should accompany you. Just leading you to the lord", she said and made a handwave in the direction of the courtyard. "And while you talk to Lord Harris, I'll inform your daughter. She arrived here just a few minutes ago, wanted to get something from her room. I can't wait to see her face" She smiled, but paused for a moment. "I mean... you know what I mean, right? The girl really needs to smile more often", she was quick to add, before starting to walk into the courtyard. Richard and Alan followed her and Richard noticed that his brother's stare was fixed on Nora's backside.

"Alan...", he hissed angrily. Alan looked up and gave him a sly grin, before looking at Nora again. "Go ahead, mylady. Lead the way", he said and gave her a polite nod. As soon as Nora turned around again, walking over the courtyard, Alan gave Richard another sly smile and raised his eyebrows. Richard only sighed as an answer and continued to follow Nora. He was shivering in anticipation. Soon he would see Jenna again. He would tell the acting lord about what he saw in the warehouse and everything would be good again...

A noise caught his attention. It was muffled, sounding far away or... from inside of the castle. And Nora heard it too, judging from her alarmed reaction. It was the shrill scream of a panicked girl. Not any panicked girl. It came out of the large building that contained the servant's quarters. His stare met Nora's and he knew that she came to the same conclusion. And then they both ran towards the building, in his case even ignoring the numbing pain in his leg. As he ran, he drew his sword, seeing Nora doing the same. As muffled as it was, there was no way Richard wouldn't recognize it. That was clearly Jenna's scream.

He had been to Jenna's room a few times when visiting her in the castle. It wasn't exactly hard to find and right now, Richard knew exactly where to go. Turning left, turning right, up the stairs, turning le... He stopped as he saw a slim figure walking down the hallway, coming closer. A young woman, probably in her mid-twenties, wearing leathery clothes, with black hair and dark grey eyes that were reddened from crying. Tears were flowing down her solemn face and she didn't even notice Richard until she was far too close to run away. She was unarmed and stopped immediately, looking at him with a look of pure shock.

Nora stopped next to him. "Why are you... who is this?", she asked. Richard pointed his sword at the woman. "This is the woman who nearly killed me. She's in league with this killer!", he shouted and saw the woman cringing as he yelled at her. She slowly raised her hands. "You are Richard Harking...", she mumbled, before shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I never wanted this, can't you see?" She had probably the saddest eyes Richard had ever seen, as well as the most angry ones. And there was something else in them, something violent. He did not care. He did not care for her, for her sadness or her regrets. She was part of the people who targeted Jenna. She had to die.

With a loud scream that was supposed to be a battlecry, he ran towards the woman swinging his sword at her. She simply took a step backwards, evading the blade, before dodging a second strike and grabbing him by the neck. The sadness in her eyes was almost gone for a moment, only the anger remaining. "I could kill you right now, Richard Harking...", she hissed. "I don't want to do it, but I will do it if you attack me again. I have my reasons to help Wolfius and the others and don't you dare questioning them" She stopped as she heard Jenna screaming again and tears were forming in her eyes again as Richard tried to free himself from her grip. "I will let you go and I won't harm you. Save your daughter. Kill Wolfius, if you manage to do it"

She put a bit of weight on his damaged leg, causing him to moan in pain. "And don't you dare attacking me again", she hissed again before releasing him. Richard took a step backwards, before running past her, noticing that Alan and Nora behind him started to corner the woman. She simply delivered a high kick right in Nora's face, causing the guard to go down, before grabbing Alan's useless pitchfork and hitting him in the throat. Alan went to the ground, gurgling and gasping for air, while the woman turned around, facing Richard again. She gave him a sorry look before running off. Richard had no time to deal with her now... he needed to get to Jenna, nothing else mattered right now!

Finally, the door to her room! Richard heard a loud cry of pain, this time not coming from her and he busted the door open. He was greeted by a terrible sight. Jenna was lying on the ground, breathing heavily, bleeding from a deep cut on the left side of her face. Wolfius stood above her, holding the right side of his face, while letting out a loud scream of agony. Blood was flowing from a large scratch right above his eye and as he noticed Richard, it wasn't even sure if his eye was blinded or damaged by the scratch. But the one eye that was clearly there saw him and the look in it was a look of pure hatred.

"Richard Harking...", Wolfius growled. "Don't you know when it's better to stay dead?" With these words he pointed his knife at Richard, who didn't even bother to answer. He let out a loud cry of rage and charged at Wolfius, swinging his sword at him. His opponent took a step backwards, parrying the tip of the sword with his knife. "Kersea left me alone, right?", he asked, taking a stab at Richard's chest, but failing to hit him as Richard jumped backwards. "Well, she'll pay for that. They all will pay", Wolfius exclaimed again, while blood ran out of the deep scratch above his eye. If his eye wasn't damaged, he would at least be temporarily blinded by all the blood running down into it. "After all...", he hissed taking a stab at Richard again, this time managing to trap the sword with his knife. "If you want something done, you have to do it yourself!", he screamed, kicking Richard in the damaged leg.

Richard screamed in agony as he felt his leg getting weaker, as well as the grip he had around his sword. With a truly beastly roar, Wolfius jumped on top of him, causing Richard to drop his sword while going down on the ground, narrowly managing to grab Wolfius' arm with the dagger. The light grey eye of his opponent was filled with bloodlust, while Richard felt something inside of him too. Rage... How could he dare targeting Jenna? How could he dare!

Wolfius had made one mistake though... Richard was stronger, far stronger. Wolfius was surprisingly light, stronger than he looked like but no match for Richard in terms of physical strength. The look of sheer bloodlust on his face turned to utter surprise as Richard managed to lift him up like a sack of hay, throwing him on the ground heavily, knocking the knife away, while lifting himself on top of Wolfius. Now it was time for payback!

His closed fist hit Wolfius right in the face, once, twice, thrice, while the beast was too surprised to even scream. The first strike caused Wolfius to fall back heavily, hitting his head. The second strike broke his nose, the third strike damaged his already wounded eye. The fourth strike...

A sudden flash of pain bolted through his right arm and as he looked down he saw a knife deeply embedded in it. Wolfius was breathing heavily, but started to grin again, his mouth bloody as he spat Richard in the face. "Don't you think you have me at your mercy, Harking. I have a second knife...", he growled, before pushing Richard off. He slowly stood up himself, his legs shaking, the knife resting weakly in his hand. "You came pretty close of killing this body, Harking. But you have no idea what I'm capable of. You think I'm just some sort of sick killer? No... I am the only man in this world who is truly free!", he shouted and raised his dagger, as the door was kicked open again. Nora stormed in, blood running down her chin, vengeance in her eyes.

Wolfius gave her an alarmed stare and decided to attack her first, dodging her strike before embedding the knife deep in her chest, causing her to fall to the ground again, her eyes wide opened. As the beast turned around, loud voices were heard from the hallway. Wolfius shrugged and gave Richard a last look of pure hatred. "It's not over, Harking. It's not over until I have killed you all. Sleep well tonight...", he growled, before darting off, running down the hallway. Nora was pulling herself up, looking at the point where the knife hit her. There was no blood, the armour saved her life. Still, she was breathing heavily, in shock and pain. And then he looked at Jenna. She was lying on the ground, the cut on her face bleeding heavily, mixing her blood and her tears. And as Richard Harking dragged himself towards his daughter to pull her into a hug, he finally started to cry himself

### **End of Chapter 3: We Write History**

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#### **Your Choices:**

**Trust:** Jenna decided to tell Septon Corbin the truth about Harris

**Compassion:** John declined Samantha's wish when she asked for the first time

**Impulse:** Maya stabbed and killed Lord Brune

**Reluctance:** Kersea decided to leave the castle without helping Wolfius

**Necessitation:** Torvin decided to save Harlan Hoare's life to win his trust

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#### **Next time on Forum of Thrones:**

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Lucas looked up as the door was opened. He had expected to be disturbed after their little show in the antechamber. But he hadn't counted on that many guards entering the room. Their leader was a tall man, probably around fifty years, maybe older. His hair was fiery red, but started to grey and he was a bit on the heavy side. Six black and orange butterflies were visible on his tabard... House Mullendore of Uplands. "Good evening Maester, Sers. I hope I

don't disturb anything important", the knight said politely while taking a stilted bow. "My name is Ser Maron Mullendore. I have a few questions for these two knights"

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"So... how's it going in the archive, Philip?", Lyria asked, looking at the man in front of her, trying to change the topic. "Have they found a true heir already?" Phillip bowed forwards, looking at her sternly and a bit softer at Rosalie. "I've overheard them talking. And yes, they have found an heir. Two, actually. One of them is a petty lord from the eastern Reach. Not that bad from what I've heard... but the other heir... well, he's a big problem, not only for us, but for Reach", he explained, his usual smile gone, replaced by a worried frown.

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

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"I'm going to kill them!", Wolfius screamed. "Harking, his fucking daughter, that blacksmith Mettel and her whore of a daughter, the guard bitch, Commander Nathamer and his whole fucking family, Harkings friends and that Katya bitch from the tavern...", he hissed, still shivering from the pain. He pointed his knife at Kersea. "And when I am done with them, I will make you pay, you and your worthless sister!" Kersea gulped, taking a step backwards, bumping into Clayton. He put a hand on her shoulder, pulling her into an unwanted hug. "Try it, Wolfius", he growled with barely concealed anger. "Try it and I will cut you down myself"

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Ellena took a step closer towards the man in front of her. She wasn't afraid of him, not at all. The Burned Man was simply a crippled old man, from what she saw he shouldn't even be able to grab things with his burned hands. She wasn't afraid of him. The Dothraki behind him on the other hand... "Welcome, Ellena", the Burned Man said with a deep baritone voice. "I am glad you decided to seek my help. Please, sit down. We have a lot to talk about"

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"Psst, Maya", Irving hissed, his voice far too loud to still count as a whisper. "I think I have seen something up there" Maya moaned, opening her eyes. It was dark and it was cold, since Irving hadn't cared about the fire. "Are you awake, Maya?", he asked again and she gave him an angry glare. "I am now", she mumbled. "What is it?" Irving pointed at the distant forest. "I've seen something in there...", he said. "And I'm cold. Can you start a fire please?"

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The man stepped closer, eyeing Jaron with pure hatred in his stare. With every step he took closer, Jaron felt Harpy shivering behind him, tears flowing down her face as she was sobbing in fear. The man stopped walking closer as Jaron pointed his sword towards him. "That's close enough!", the knight shouted, surprised about how weak his voice sounded. The man gave him a cold, cruel smirk. "Trying to play the hero, you bastard?", he asked, raising his left hand. Jaron saw movement in the dark, men surrounding him and Harpy. The man took another step forwards, this time not even bothering with Jarons shaking sword. He

looked at him and at Harpy, who was still panicking. His smile got wider and Jaron noticed that half of his teeth were missing. As he spoke, his voice was deeper than before, more intimidating, as cold as ice, as brutal as a dragons fire.  
“Do you have any idea who I am?”

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## **Forum of Thrones, Act II, Chapter I: Butterfly; Coming Soon!**

Congratulations, you have reached the end of Act 1. Book 1 is going to have two additional acts, both of which will be longer than this first one, so you're still going to be in for a treat. I am happy you have been here until now, as this likely means you enjoyed what you have read so far. Prepare for some pretty dramatic twists in the next chapter. For now, here are two links for you:

[Back to the main document](#)

[Onwards to Chapter 4: Butterfly](#)