Aster looked up at the sky with annoyance. The weather had not made the trip easy so far.

She looked out over Allegoth Basin and was not surprised to see its dark waters whip and crash into the rocky shore.

The damned road had turned into a insufferable mudtrap and every sane soul had long sought shelter.

Aster pulled her foul weather cloak closer to her and tried to sheild herself from the sudden and gale like assaults of raw pelting rain. She regretted departing from the forest, but she had business in the city tonight.

Above her, and off on its plateau she could make out Dor's crag, or at least some of its lights. The mammoth shelf of rock jutted out into open space from the side of the mountain range, lifted by unknown forces. Local legend said that the ice giant Dor had fought a great battle against some foe here, and in their struggle the mountains themselves were smashed into pieces, leaving the crag.

Regardless of how it was formed, the city was just as impressive as when she had last seen it, which, come to think of it, was a while ago. As she stared and slowly marched through the ankle deep mud, a sudden bolt of lightening lit the sky, striking off in the mountainous distance.

While she waited for the thunder, the sky was for a moment lit up in silluette, the carved edge of the city peeking out just slightly from the massive cliff it sat on. The main feature from her angle over the lake was the tall lighthouse right on the most extreme part of the ledge, almost overhanging the lake below.

The oddity had always been there, and no one could reason out why it had been built, or who had built it, especially since the river was unnavigable past Illithar. Whatever the reason, it was the defacto symbol of the city. Her city. Theoretically.

She sighed as the hood was once again torn from her head and trailed uselessly behind her. The rain beat down on her, seemingly aiming itself for her face. Even though it was not winter proper, the droplets seemed cold as ice. She clenched her fists, and continued forward through the horribleness.

Her hair, which she recently had styled, if only to help in negotiations, had freed itself from its binds and whipped behind her, following her hood, its long blond threads assuredly becoming a sopping mess.

She drew closer to the shore and despite the horrid weather, silently gave thanks that the storm hadn't hit when she was coming over from the islands. Although they were now her adopted home, she lacked the Shani's assurance when it came to ocean travel.

For this reason, and partly out of nostalgia, she almost smiled a bit as the wind tried to force her backwards down the road: Gods damn the weather, but it was Northern weather right?

The cold depths of the Allegoth Basin now were the closest the road got to the massive lake, and Aster could look across its expanse properly as she trudged by its shore.

She could make out the island in the middle and its useless rocky cliff shores through a gap in the trees. All along the shore there were wands of tall mash grass, an especially heardy variety that could grow in the north, but soon even they would turn brittle against the onslaught of winter. These she knew choked the south west exit of the lake, but it seemed also have grown up along the south of it as well, where the road ran.

In the south, the lake probably would have been an illdealic calm blue expanse, with lots of fish and plentiful farming area nearby. Unfortunately it was in the north, where the geography rarely seemed to cooperate. Like the weather, Aster reflected with a bit of annoyance as another gust tried to knock her around, the land itself seemed to actively work against the tenacious Northerns who tried to live there.

The lake instead was dreadfully deep and almost unbelievably cold, even during the summer. Its shores were bad as well, every inch of it was either insufferable vine and grass choked bog or deadly sharp rocks. The wind didn't behave well on it either.

Every couple of years some enterprising individual would try to fish it, or try to build a house on the island in the center but none had succeeded, and in fact the hulls of the last endeavor lay right ahead of her, their skeletal white remains strewn along the shore, much further up than one would expect.

Gods, if it wasn't for Haverson she never would have come back to this place, birth town or no.

She trudged through the last few yards of muck and was at last comforted by the large copse of trees through which the road now ran. The tall, sturdy trees still had their leaves and she was glad of this fact as the heard another gust hit, the forest around her groaning in protest.

She checked her pack for a moment, and the sword by her side and continued onward.

Emerging from the trees, she crossed the Domhain at the base of the plateau where it etched the corner of the rocky expanse. Below her, the sturdy bridge sat not quite as reassuring as it should have been. Beneath it ran a torrential amount of water, churning white as it raced itself towards the choppy depths of Allegoth Basin.

Before her was the cliff itself. It loomed nearly two hundred feet of solid rock above her, its face drenched with run off. The stone was a dark color, known for its usefulness in construction, and its bountiful ores. The many faces of the cliff flashed as another lightening bolt split the sky, this one closer, booming almost palpably through the air.

Aster looked up quickly. Rock falls here were rare, which was why the winch was here, but the did happen, and when they did they were usually quite large…

Luckily, no potential bounders caught her eye. Instead, her eyes caught sight of the winch, slowly, painfully slowly in this weather, descending down the cut in the cliff.

Haverson better be here. She had been somewhat glad to see him after so long in Mellont, but regardless of the job he had set up, if he didn't show, she was going to stay the night and be off as soon as she could, whether or not the rain had stopped.

However, as she got closer to the cut, traveling along the bottom of the cliff on another mud doomed road, she caught sign of another person.

Haverson sat sullenly, drenched as well, on a rock looking up at the winch with palpable contempt. As he watched it, Aster could have sworn it slowed.

He ran a hand through tangled greying hair, before spying her.

Despite the weather, he rose with a smile and a shout, waving his hand at her.

As Aster closed the distance with the older man, she couldn't help but feel guilty, even if her actions had been justified. By the looks of things, the last year had not been as kind to him as it had been to her.

“Some weather huh?” he said with a grin, holding out a hand to catch the rain as it fell. “What a setting for a reunion!”

Now it was aster's turn to run a hand through her hair. “Gods, what a drag. You should have scheduled better weather old man. I didn't come all this way to get rained on you know!”

Haverson shrugged and sat back down on his rock, gesturing at another near him. Despite the pooled water on its surface, Aster sat. It had been a long several days from Harsos in the hills, and even she felt the exhaustion now that the call of a warm bed was just several feet above her.

“So how have you been doing?” Haverson asked.

“Not bad. Except for this shit of course. Harsos was a success. I must admit, your feeling was right, the Sherrif did want to secure futures on the harvest. Of course, the Shani I represent want their ceramics just as much. It was a profitable transaction, well, it will be when the good actually get to their respective places.”

“Good, good. I'm glad I didn't waste your time.”

“No, everything went well. Thank you for the tip. But… Haverson, you don't want to talk about business, I know. How have you been? I won't lie you don't look well.”

Haverson caughed and spat to his side, apparently a new habit.

“Well, I can't say things have gone too well for me. The group I told you about turned out to be a bunch of theives. Literally. They got away with half of my gold before I was able to land one in jail.”

“Have you seen any of our old friends? Germain or Meridia?” Aster asked, but felt as if she knew the answer.

“No.” Haverson said, shaking his head. “Germain's still off doing his soul searching and Meridia is still training recruits, by your way in Swan last I heard.”

“Hmm. How about any of the others?”

“No. But I've been roughing it more than not.”

“Yeah. I can tell.”

“There's a nice town now where Wildermark used to be. But they've got some strange weed problem, the crops didn't come up good this year because of it. I stopped there for a month or two, but it wasn't really something I could help with. The mayor wanted nature walkers, not my kind of adventurer.”

“I see.” Aster said simply, realizing that her short response would stifle the conversation, but was unable to think of any response other than that.

“How uhh, how is Ellis?”

“You don't really want to know.” Aster snapped before she could stop herself. She regretted the outburst instantly.

Haverson looked wounded, but recovered quickly, his face slipping into the more emotionless state Aster hated.

“Sorry.” She said, softly. “I didn't mean it to come out like that. He's doing well... I'm doing well. The islands are rich with trade, even in this political climate. You should think about taking the ship out as well, there's more than a few big whigs who need bodyguards.”

“Mabye.” Haverson said, looking up at the winch.

Aster knew there was no chance of that happening.

And yet she also hated to see the man like he was. It was clear he'd been drinking and Aster could tell he'd lost muscle mass by just looking at his arms.

“What kind of job you got for us?” She asked, also looking up towards the winch, its glacial movement finally moving it close enough for Aster to make out the details on the platform. The gears on the side spun slowly, throwing water off with every revolution. The many, many ropes which held it in the air vibrating, but never tangling in the violent weather.

“Nothing special I'm afraid, but I thought it would be fun nonetheless. Some of the mine owners want us to check out some new caverns they found. Apparently two their tunnels happened on the thing at the same time and they want someone to see how big it is and where it goes.”

“Huh. I haven't done any caving in a long time. Is it a lot of climbing?” She asked, still looking up at the platform.

“Won't know until we get there I guess.”

“And its not...” She asked, going silent and letting the implications of her question voice themselves.

“No. It not your father's mine, its two small players. I wouldn't bust something like that on you.”

“No I guess not.”

“But now that you mention it, when was the last time you were here? You know you could say hi to the family, right? I mean, its been years right?”

Aster exhaled sharply, and she supressed a frown. “I mean, I send them letters sometimes..”

“But how long?”

“I don't know, two years I think? I only saw them once when I was with you and once after, you remember, the family was out once when I tried.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

Aster snorted. “Nothing you could have done about it.”

“But you're right, I should see how they are doing,” She said, softer, “Its funny, I never thought it would end up like this, but I'm basically doing my father's business after all. All this negotiating and trading? Why did I ever leave?” She said dryly.

“How about you?” She said, reversing the question back at Haverson.

Haverson shrugged a bit. “Brother is doing well. Everything is still good for him. He and his wife have three… no four, now. The old two are able to help them out in the fields and he's got two others working for him. He talked over buying out the neighbor's farm as well when the old man passes.”

“I… I stayed there for a bit as well, helped him out. It was good, but...” Haverson broke off, and looked away from Aster for a moment. “Well, you know… Its just not *me.*” he said firmly, suddenly staring at her as if trying to convince her of something.

She didn't quite know how to react.

The moment passed. “It was just too much. The farming is boring but not bad, and it helped me get back in some shape, but its just too… I can't really describe it. Its like, I sat there on the farm on the fence and looked out at what he'd done with that land and saw the kids running around and it just felt so foreign, like we were back in the South, like I was looking through some mirror of another life, or another world. I… had to leave after that month, I couldn't bear it.”

Aster again didn't know quite what to say, so she just nodded, as if she understood. For all her practice negotiating with mercants, mercenaries, haggling over bars of iron and wheat and labor, it seemed like she still couldn't hold a conversation with Haverson anymore.

It was a shame. There was something wrong and broken about it really. They had been close for years, hells, he had basically raised her. So for the words to just trap themselves in her mouth when usually they came so easily…

Thankfully the platform came to a struggling halt next to them.

“I guess we should get on.” She said, gesturing to the winch.

He muttered a reply that Aster didn't hear. But followed her onto the platform.

The winch was almost twenty feet long and ten feet wide, made out of the sturdiest trunks the foresters could find that year. The logs were lashed together tightly, rope running arround and also in between the logs. However, the most impressive feature of the winch was of course the winch mechanism itself.

The platform ran up and down on metal wheels arrayed horizontally which ran in grooves set into the stone side of the half shaft.

Legend said that the shaft used to be just a simple crack in the rock up which adventurous and fearless children used to climb, some without the assistance of ropes. Eventually this caught the attention of an ecentric man who used to design the tracks for the mines. He thought he might be able to make a simmilar sort of system. After two years of cutting it had been completed.

Whenever it had been made, since then it had been destroyed no less than ten times, a couple due to greedy merchants overloading the platform with heavy wagons. However, others were just twists of fate. It took nearly a day and a half to hike through and around the Allegoth Basin via the old unkept southern road, especially now that the old bridge had fallen a decade or so ago. Everyone took the winch now.

Normally there was an operator at the bottom and some guards as well, but Aster supposed that they didn't expect anyone in this weather. She frowned.

“Did you call the winch?”

“Yeah. You just have to jerk the rope a couple of times.” Haverson said, pointing to an additional rope that always ran the full length of the cliff face. “Its a good thing we got a response. I half figured that they wouldn't send it down in this weather.”

“Seriously!” Aster agreed, realizing how unsafe the whole damn contraption was now that it was starting to lift off the ground. The gears behind her groaned and the damn contraption started its long, long journey upward.

The stood awkwardly looking out on the rushing river below them. As the platform clinked its way up the mountain, its metal wheels squealing even through the sound of the storm, they broke tree height and were able to make out the assortment of farms to the North East.

In front of them, the road branched with the southern facing section being the one that Aster had taken on the way here. The northern branch ran by a farm house, just barely visible in the storm. Aster could make out a fence and some presumably soggy crops. To the south of the house, there was a further branch from the crossroads that went east.

This road was wider than its northern and southern compatriots and ran all the way to Mellont. To the south of this road, the scenery gave way to tall trees, swaying erratically in the gale. These got denser until it became proper forest that lead into heavily forested hills, the closest of which she could see.

“You like the work you're doing?” Haverson asked, breaking the silence, and turned to Aster.

Aster wiped the drenched hair out of her eyes and glanced back at him.

“Yes. Its going quite well. It turns out that all my years of adventuring with you give me quite the leg up over the usual merchants. Most of them have never experienced this world. I wanted to thank you for that, by the way. I can't remember us staying in one place for more than a week!” She said, a sliver of a smile forming on her lips.

Despite his best efforts, Haverson mirrored the expression. “Well, you know, we were just following the contracts. You can't stay in one place for long. It becomes… too familiar.” He said, trailing off as he finished as if he were suddenly remembering something.

“But its going well. That's good. I was always a bit surprised you stayed for as long as you did.”

“Really?” She said, shocked and a bit hurt. She frowned. “What else would I have done? Gone back home?” She said, a frown appearing.

“No, not like that. Just something different. You were young, you could have done everything, anything… Adventuring might be glamorized but its for the desperate. Only when you can't do anything else, you know? Only desperate people wager their lives.” He said.

Aster listened, but didn't really agree. “Is that true? I don't think I ever thought of what we did as a job. We helped people. We took care of tasks. Yes, some of them were dangerous. Yes some people didn't walk away form it, but we did, right? In that sense it was liberating, living on the edge of life.” She said, surprising herself with nostalgia. For a moment, the old places floated up in her mind, some of them had faces with them as well. She grabbed the railing.

“I won't lie, that is one privileged viewpoint. You were a kid. Did you really understand how close we got sometimes?” Haverson said, growling. “You could have done anything...” He repeated.

“Did I understand?” Aster asked, voice growing louder. It had been a while, but it seemed like Haverson still knew ho to push her buttons.

“Of course I understood! Do you think I was playing a god damn game when I slid that sword into other people? Or how about in that library? I still don't know what on earth went down there. That was the turning point I think, both the beginning and the end. I knew I had to get better at adventuring at life, or it was going to eat me.”

“So don't act all forced either. You could have done anything as well! You and your damn talk of threads, and forces, and your damn mysterious 'master'. You could have gone back to the military, you could have become someone's bodyguard, you could have been a settler. Hells, you could have gone back to your brother. I'm sure he found it hard to explain to those kids why their uncle left!” Aster said, again, regretting the words as they escaped her mouth.

Haverson stiffened and looked like he had been punched.

The platform rumbled on, picking up speed a bit. Perhaps the operators wanted to get the damn thing up and done with so they could finally go home.

“Huh.” Haverson said. “You've certainly gotten older Aster.”

That was not the response she had expected. He took a step towards her.

“I guessed I always hoped that you would be able to do what I couldn't get myself to do, to live a normal life.” He admitted.

“What I do is not exactly normal.” Aster said, biting her lip. “The company puts a great deal of responsibility my way. Its been only two years, but I think they're considering be to take over for the old man when he decides to give it up.” She said, diverting the conversation purposefully.

“Fine. And what exactly is it that you do for them? You just asked for business opportunities earlier.” He asked, allowing her diversion.

“Well, I investigate and counsel them on… business opportunities. I do transactions, I haggle and negotiate contracts. And sometimes, rarely, I kill assassins that they send after the company.” Aster smiled.

Haverson looked at her, trying to figure out whether she was serious or not.

“I'm joking damn it!” She said, throwing up her hands. “What happened to your sense of humor?”

“Heh, I don't know. I guess I just haven't had anything to laugh about in a while.” Haverson said.

They were almost up the cliff now, and Aster took the lull in the conversation to glance upward.

A head peaked over the cliff back at her and then vanished. The rain slowed, but it was growing darker.

“Hmm. How much is this damn thing again?” She asked, changing the subject again.

“For us? Ten gold. They know we can pay. They may even make it more since they had to operate in this storm.”

“They charge more based on who they bring up?” She asked.

“Yeah, didn't you grow up here?”

“Yes, but I don't ever remember the pricing model of the damn winch. And I haven't been back in a while and when I did I came from the west.”

“Well, they charge what they know you can pay. Some people try to disguise themselves sometimes but it usually doesn't go well for them.” Haveson added, also looking upwards.

The winch creaked upward.

As they ascended, Aster took in how tall the plateau really was. Two hundred feet was rather tall: enough to make the houses look like ants, and the bridge they passed like a twig. She wasn't afraid of heights usually, but the storm may have factored into things. She backed away from the edge and paced closer to the cliff.

Several minutes passed, Aster clearly thinking about something with Haverson merely watching.

Finally as they were approaching the top he suddenly stood up.

“Look, Aster, there's something I want to talk to you about.” He said, grabbing her attention as she paced.

She stopped but didn't say anything.

Haverson inhaled, and scratched the beginnings of a beard.

“I guess… I guess I wanted to say I was sorry.”

“Sorry?” Aster asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yes. I wanted… You know… All about Ellis.” He waited a moment for her to protest. But she didn't.

Instead she just sighed.

“Before you say anything, I just wanted to say that with the benefit of some time, I realize I acted immaturely. I was just so wound up with, well, protecting you, that I never realized that you didn't need to be protected.”

“No I didn't.” Aster said. “I've done well so far.”

“There's more to it.” Haverson said, raising a hand. “Its hard to describe, but ever since the incident, or no… ever since I broke that sword and decided to put that part of my life behind me, I have been looking for something, anything...” He stammered, clenching his hands.

“Looking?” Aster said.

“Not actually, more like spiritually. Or philosophically. Its just… You have to have a reason to do things right? Doesn't there need to be a reason for it all? I can't just move around from place to place like a leaf on the wind.”

“I couldn't stay with my brother. I thought I could, but it got too hard Aster. It was too hard. Something inside me cried out everytime I saw those kids. I-I couldn't help but think of all the horrible things I've seen, hell, that I've done… It was just so foreign, I couldn't bear it.”

Aster looked concerned. Haverson looked disheveled, but more so than his outward appearance was the force with which he was trying to make his case.

“I-I'm not sure I understand all of what you're saying Haverson. I know about the old war horrors, you told me about it all, remember? But I don't see how that has anything to do with now. I thought you said you put all that behind you? It seemed like you did when you were with me, for the most part at least.”

Haverson shook his head and seemed to withdraw a bit.

By now the rain had stopped.

“Sorry. I'm not making any sense.” Haverson said, shaking his head again. “I suppose I just wanted to apologize for our last conversation. There were things I said that I never should have. I got to know Ellis a bit when he traveled with us, I'm sure he is a fine man.”

Aster studied the older man. “Haverson. You said what you said. It happened a long time ago. If you want though we can talk about it more. To be honest I'm a bit concerned with what you've been doing since I left.”

“Sure. We can talk at the tavern I guess.” He glanced up again at the sky.

“Hey, at least the rain has stopped, right?”

Aster looked up as well.

“Huh. I suppose it did.” She grinned at Haverson.

The world shuddered.

“What the!”

Haverson saw the winch twist underneath them as it came to a sudden stop. They lurched, the assembly groaning. Rope fell around them. The platform shuttered again.

Both of them grabbed the railing as the winch slipped a notch and then locked in place, letting out a screeching noise as the winch skewed and lodged in the teetched rails that it normally traveled in.

“God damn it.” Haverson said, straining to hold onto the rope from falling over.

The two brushed themselves off and looked around.

“I'm not paying them that ten gold, let me tell you.” Aster said.

Haverson merely shook his head.

“Somethings off. It looks like we're stuck.” He walked closer to the platform. “The mechanism looks like its still intact but the whole platform is lodged at a slight angle in its track. I can't see a way that we can right it, short of magic. You haven't picked up anything from Ellis have you?”

“No. You know it doesn't work that way.” Aster said.

“I don't know about you then, but I'm not going to stand here and wait for them to figure out the messed everything up. Lets just climb up.”

“Climb up?” Aster asked.

“Sure. Look, its only a bit to the top anyway. You're still in shape right? Better than me for sure.” He said, pointing upwards at the cables that lead to the top.

He produced a strip of cloth and tossed a piece to Aster.

They looped the pieces around the cable and used the friction to climb the rope, bracing their feet as they went.

Although the trick worked, they were soon panting. The rain had made the travel poor, and neither of them were quite as up to the climbing as they might have been two years ago.

When they finally made it over the edge, they had to roll themselves over it. They lay there for a moment breathing hard, before getting to their feet.

“Oh!” Aster said. The color from her face draining. Then her expression changed, becoming harder. She let out a small hiss, and her hand flung itself to her sword.

Haverson's smile from climbing together vanished instantly, and his sword appeared in his hand.

In front of them, at the edge of the cliff, were the two operators, their bodies cut to pieces. From the still pooling blood, Haverson could tell that it was recently. Very recent.

“You're armed right?” he asked, taking a quick glance back at Aster.

“Yes.” She said darkly, drawing her own weapon. “Something went wrong here.”

“Sure looks like it.” Haverson commented, the two of them slowly approaching the gate.

The mechanism for the winch was a piece of rotating metal which spun in place, secured into the ground. Around it was a track for oxen, and it took four usually to pull the winch upwards. Off to the side there was some other mechanism that played some key part.

Both of these mechanisms looked undamaged, and the oxen, trained to stop if the load was too forceful, looked at them dumbly. However, one of the four massive lines that ran to the winch had been severed. The twisted pieces of trailing rope were still wrapped around the spinner, but one end was trodden into the mud by the oxen, its far end cut through.

Past the winch spin was the gate to the city itself. Since the winch could be raised in times of war, creating a wall far larger than any that a human could build, it was nothing like those of Illithar or even Dor's Crag's other side, where the plateau lowered into a rocky plain.

“There are no guards. That doesn't seem right.” Haverson said.

“No. Its doesn't. Where is everyone?” Aster asked, glancing at the bodies. “These men were killed viciously. Gods, it looks like they were just cut down.”

“I saw.” Haverson said, voice lacking emotion. “I've seen wounds like that before many times. Come. I think the gate might even be open.”

Even after all the events that had transpired between the two, and their two year estrangement, she followed him, just like they used to do. Some things changed about a person with time, others didn't. She knew that when he got like this, when his smile faded, and the creases started forming along his too-old face that he usually knew what he was doing.

They approached the door from the side, careful not to make any loud noises, or stand in front of an opening where an attacker might see them. As Haverson readied himself to open the door, Aster checked the wall above them. No one was there.

“Wait. One second.” She whispered. “Do you remember someone looking down at us earlier?”

“Perhaps. Let do this quick. We may catch whoever it was by surprise.” Haverson said.

He lashed out quickly, slipping through the doorway with Aster right behind him.

Inside the walls, things seemed just as bad. There were four guards, all dead. Aster lifted up the first one from the sodden ground. He had his throat slashed right through his leather collar, the blood spilling over and losing itself amid his black uniform. She grimmiced and put him back down.

Haverson inspected the other two. These had puncture wounds to their skull, single blows. He got up slowly from his crouch, the bodies falling back to the ground.

As he walked to the fourth Aster looked further around down the street. Besides the lack of people in the immeadite vecinity, there was nothing else that looked amiss. The city certainly hadn't been sacked. Such a thing would have been impossible, as well as loud. It was quiet. There were lights on in far away houses, but Aster couldn't see any other guards.

“”

-guards are dead

-fight with faceless

-aster dies

-haverson makes pact with kerack

-throws other man off cliff

-carries aster to house