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.

“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.

-talk more

-gets “stuck”

-they climb a story up

-guards are dead

-fight with faceless

-aster dies

-haverson makes pact with kerack

-throws other man off cliff

-carries aster to house