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 suppressed a frown. “I mean… I'm sure that...”

“How long has it been?”

“I don't know, two years I think? I never saw them once when I was with you, you remember, the family was out the one time 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 immediate vicinity, 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.

“What should we do?” Aster asked, looking again at the bodies with distaste. “There have to be guard around here somewhere.”

“I'm not sure we want to get the guard involved, if these bodies are any indication. Whoever did this was a killer through and through.” Haverson said, turning to Aster. “But that’s not the worst part. I have this feeling that whoever did this is still around.”

“What makes you say that?”

“None of their gold has been taken. None of these men hold any rank higher than just guardsman. None of them is likely to have had any intelligence on them.”

“So it wasn't a robbery gone bad or an assasination.” Aster said, following Haverson's line of thought.

“Well. Not quite. It means they weren't the target.” He said, eyes scanning the roads carefully. A movement caught his eye.

“If we want to run, we just missed our chance Aster. I...I think this was an assasination, there's no one skilled enough to do this otherwise. But they weren't the targets. Which means...the targets are us!” he said pointing his sword at a dark alley.

“Come out murderer.” He said, voice flat.

A man emerged from the alleyway. Despite herself, Aster took an invuluntary step backwards.

The man was about six feet tall and of medium build. He wore black leather and Aster could make out at least four knives and a sword on his person. He wore light boots, and Aster realized that although the man was walking towards them, he left no sound of footprints upon the stone street. His face was hidden by a hood but as he grew close he threw it backwards, revealing short black hair. His face was covered by a grey mask which not only covered his face, but was also somehow attached to it.

There was something off about the way he moved that Aster could not quite nail down. It was almost like he was limping.

“So w-what do you think of my handiwork.” The man said, pointing a gloved hand towards the bodies on the ground. His voice was just a hollow rasp, nothing like Aster had heard before. It was clear he had trouble talking.

“Well, to be honest, I'm disgusted.” Haverson said, still holding his sword. “You're not from here are you?”

“Hmm. I w-wasn't told there would be two… just the girl...” The man said, scratching his head. He still had not drawn his sword or knives. When he got almost thirty feet away, he stopped.

Aster grimaced and tightened her hold on her sword.

“What do you want from me?” She asked, but felt like she knew the answer.

“I must… apologize for the t-theatrics. I thought they would have gone in for the storm. I would have met...” he coughed somehow through the mask he wore,”...you at the bottom but I was a bit delayed myself. I don't get out much, as you can see, so I like to… spend my time. To answer your question, I am here to kill you Aster La Rouche.”

Aster's eyes widened, but she didn't back down.

“Perhaps we can talk this through. My employers might be able to arrange a better deal.” She said, trying to negotiate.

“Ah” Haverson said, exhaling suddenly. “That won't work with this one Aster. This man… he is like I was once.”

The man looked at Haverson. “You are quite right. I do not know you. You are not my target. You can leave any time you like. My business is with the woman.”

“It seem like my reputation does not precede me. I'm glad the years have grown and they have forgotten me. It is better that way.” Haverson said. “But I am not going anywhere. If you want to harm Aster you'll have to go through me.”

“I m-must admit. This might be a... deal more interesting than I originally thought. A rich heiress? You look nothing of the sort.” He said, looking Aster over. “Actually you look quite capable. As does your friend here. But I'm afraid it will not help you. I have never let a target escape. Ever.”

“It seems like there a lack of information on your part. I have nothing to do with my family. I do not do business for or even with them.”

“Well. That is a surprise. I will have to let my employer know when I bring him your head.”

“Y-You're still going to fight us?” Aster asked, gritting her teeth and slightly adjusting her stance.

“Of course. And I will win.” The man said, cocking his head. “Perhaps this will be very interesting. Most people attack me when I stand here and just talk like this. Ah well.” The man draw his sword, and rushed at them.

Aster froze for a second, but Haverson sprung into action. As the man ran towards her, Haverson ran towards him, but at an angle which forced him to confront the older man or be flanked.

The man tracked Haverson methodically as he ran out of the corner of his eyes and at the last second before the two came into contact, he stopped abruptly, springing backwards and threw one of his knives with his off hand.

Haverson dodged out of the way even as he was running and his sword flashed out.

The two made contact and a sinking feeling instantly developed in Haverson's stomach.

With that one contact he could tell several things about their adversary. The first was that he was stronger than Haverson. Not by a massive amount, but perhaps the same strength gap between he and Aster. The second was that he was out of practice: a condition that was definitely not shared by his opponent.

The blades slid apart and the two men circled each other.

Haverson scanned the other man again, for any points of interest. The mask certainly was strange, but it didn't seem to hinder the other man's fighting, and seemed to almost be part of the other man's face since it wasn't held on by any straps Haverson could see. The sword he had was ordinary, perhaps a little heavier and a bit shorter than Haverson's own.

Haverson's eyes widened. “Aster, he's coming for you!” he yelled, breaking Aster from her shock. He sprinted after the other man.

The masked man lunged at Aster, crossing the twenty feet or so between them at astonishing speed.

She brought up her own sword, deflecting the attack, and whiped her lighter sword around fast, but found the assailant's weapon already ready to stop her.

She sprung backward as the man attacked her again. Haverson felt a bit of relief. Although it had been two years, it seemed Aster retained a measure of her old training.

Haverson reached the man and purposely attacked him frantically, forcing the masked man to turn to defend himself. Haverson could tell that although he was distracting the man, his stamina would not outlast his opponent. The masked man's movements and counters were not flawless, but he moved with an effortlessness that made it hard to predict his movement. If they won this fight it would be because they could attack from both sides, as Haverson had tried to set up twice now.

Aster stabbed at the man while he was occupied with Haverson, but the masked man somehow anticipated the attack, leaning back just enough to have the sword pass in front of him, leaving Aster exposed.

The man's arm moved. Aster's surprise was just appearing as her attack missed. Haverson could see the attack coming. Damn it!

Haverson forced his body forward, striking as fast as he could at the man's torso.

Haverson's attack connected, but the armor the other man had seemed to have some kind of metal in it, since the sword just barely cut it, revealing only the smallest of wounds. Blood seeped too slowly from it.

But as Haverson congratulated himself, assured that the man wasn't under the aegis of some powerful magic, he let out a choke of surprise. His eyes followed what his body was only just recognizing. Reaching out and impaling his offhand arm, was the masked man's own arm holding a knife.

Aster cried out and took a swipe at the man's head. “Damn you! You piece of shit!”

The man ducked, but Aster saw this coming, and swept her foot straight into his crotch with her left leg.

The duck turned into a fall and the man collapsed to the pavement.

Haverson stared at the knife jutting out from his arm. He inhaled and exhaled quickly and tore the weapon from his body. Pain lanced through his arm, and some part of his mind was sure that the knife had gone into bone. He tried to not look at the blood.

Aster approached the huddled man.

“I hope that hurt, you pathetic filth!” She said, going to stab the man as he lay on the ground.

Haverson looked up from his task just in time to see what was going on. The man's feet were still crouched, rather than planted flat. “Aster! He's faking!” he cried out, realizing that the man and subtly turned his collapse into an opportunity.

She dodge to the side as his sword swept out from his side, catching her in the side.

“Fuck you!” Haverson yelled, not waiting to see if the blow connected, springing forward. But the man was already ready for him, turning and straightening at almost superhuman speeds. The two traded blows several times.

Meanwhile, Aster checked her side quickly, wincing when she saw the blood pooling through her travel clothing. She gritted her teeth and attacked as well.

Whoever the man in the mask was, he was good. He had achieved his apparent goal of injuring both of them, slowing them just enough to make it possible for him to actually fight them two on one. He spun, and dodged just as fast as both of them, deflecting or forcing back all their attacks. Even more, he constantly moved backward, forcing them to follow him to maintain their flank.

This state of affairs lasted several minutes, neither side able to land any major attacks. Aster and Haverson may have been out of practice, but in a life or death situation, their old skills flowed quickly to their fingers and feet.

Finally, it was clear the man was getting frustrated. He delivered a much stronger than usual counter blow to Haverson's attack, and then put his weight behind it. Haverson, not expecting this found himself with the wrong stance, and he felt himself falling.

While Haverson fell, Aster attacked the man with increased fervor, nicking his side and face, but never managing to land a proper blow.

But the man no longer had to deal with Haverson as the older man rolled backwards and to his feet and attacked Aster with an even more fearsome set of attacks, making advantage of his greater strength. Aster was push back onto the defensive, and was hard pressed just to block his attacks.

As Haverson rushed forward to take the focus off of her, the man spun around and threw something from his jacket. “Stop interfering!”

Haverson spun to the side, but it wasn't a knife that the man threw, and the object wasn't even a knife.

A blinding life seared into Haverson's eyes, and the sudden whiteness blinded him. For just a moment, he was horrifyingly reminded of the incident. Fortunately, the moment was a brief one, and Haverson expected an attack. Because of this, the masked man's thrust hit him on the right side rather than the left.

Haverson screamed as the blade passed through his armor and into his body. Red hot fire burned inside of him and he struggled for a breath that refused to come. He choaked blood and looked up as his eye sight returned.

“Enton!” Aster yelled, seeing him stricken. But the assailant had counted on her distraction as well. His blade shot forward. Aster went to doge but realized that the masked man had purposefully stood on her foot while lunging, catching her off balance.

She threw her sword up and he caught it skillfully, sliding along the edge and, with a flick of his hand, wrenched the weapon from her hand. Aster let out a cry as he attacked again. She had no weapons left and could barely react in time. She threw up her hands to catch the blade, even if she only wore leather gloves. He simply pressed his attack stronger and sent the blade straight through her outstretched hands and into her head.

Haverson stood still, not wanting to understand what he was seeing.

The man kicked Aster's feet from under her, but the way she moved it was clear that she was already…

The masked man knelt and wrenched the blade from her skull, at the same time, checking to make sure she was... Straightening, he confronted a horrified Haverson.

“I do apologize, but I always get my target. I told you you weren't part of this. You're free to go.” he said, turning to walk away.

“No...” Haverson said, the word leaking from his trembling lips. “No, it can't be...”

“There was so much more! It should have been me!” he screamed, his whole body now trembling. Somewhere within him, the void lurked, sending up its enticing emptiness, but he was much too far gone for that to have any effect on him now.

The masked man continued to walk away.

The blood welled from her forehead, spilling out onto her tangled blond hair, staining it red.

“It should have been me!” Haverson screamed at the man. “How dare you!” His feet found themselves, and his fingers tightened around his weapon. His wounds were forgotten for a moment.

He launched himself at the other man. Haverson thought very little as he slid from attack to attack, fighting like a man possessed. The man in the mask calmly defended himself.

“I t-told you. I don't have any business with you.”

“Well I have fucking business with you!” Haverson screamed, his eyes bulging.

He continued attacking, sometimes getting in a few glancing hits to the man's armor, but few connected. The man simply countered, making no effort to attack Haverson. How could he be so calm!

Haverson let out a blood curdling yell and put all of his force into his next attack, aimed straight at the man's masked face.

More pain lanced through his body. The masked man had hit before him. Haverson's attack quivered and his arms slumped. Haverson had been stabbed through the stomach. He coughed and tried to catch a breath.

The man slid his sword out of Haverson's stomach causing Haverson to cry out again in pain, but this time, only blood spurted from his open mouth, and the older man fell to the ground.

“I'm sorry about all this. This was an interesting time. You two were much better than I anticipated or expected. I will have to tell my employer about this. You injured me. No one's managed to hurt me this badly in a long time.” The masked man said looking down at the assortment of small wounds he had across his body as he straightened.

Was this the end? Haverson's vision started to fade around the corners. The void grew as it never had before, spreading slowly, unbidden, from his stomach, and extending outward first into his legs and then his arms.

He suddenly felt very cold. This was the end? He was bleeding out badly. The pain was thankfully so overwhelming as to be distant. He couldn't feel anything now that the void was coming for him, one last time whether he wished it to or not.

He turned and looked at Aster, who still lay on the ground, now in a large pool of her own blood. His finger tightened around his sword. No. He couldn't. Not now. He slammed the blade into the stones, and hauled himself forward with it. The void started to retreat just a tiny bit.

There was only one way now. Only one way forward. He coughed up blood, again and again until his throat finally cleared. His muscles bulged as he held himself upwards with his arm. He was looking at Aster. Aster was dead. The masked man had killed Aster. He had killed Aster. Haverson's face contorted into a hideous grimace.

“Kerack!” he yelled as loudly as he could to the sky.

“Kerack, you old black bastard! You offered me something once! I want it. I accept. Everything. All of it. Whatever the price!”

It was quiet on the street. The masked man continued to walk away from Haverson at a slow and leisurely pace towards the winch.

“You said I could still accept! Germain said I could still accept! Kerack you piece of shit, I'm dying! This is your last fucking chance…” he coughed up blood, his strength failing.

There was still silence.

Haverson started laughed quietly. “You fucking waste of a god.” Then more quietly, “Aster, I'm so sorry.”

But just as he was starting to fade, he was blinded again. This time by a massive pillar of white flame, which descended and engulfed him. It was so powerful and so quick that later he wasn't sure whether he had actually seen it.

He was slammed into the ground, he could feel the inexorable pressure of the flames pushing him into the stone beneath him. He could smell his leather burning and then his skin and hair burning as well. He was surrounded by the light, the fire around him, engulfing him, searing onto him, into him...

I AGREE

Then it was all over.

The masked figure had stopped.

Haverson felt a tingling sensation. He looked down, his armor and flesh scorched. The pain suddenly emerging from all over his body, and his previous wounds multiplying their pain by tenfold. His mouth opened to scream but instead it turned into a bestial cry.

His feet planted themselves and his body followed almost unbidden as he rose. His stomach wounds were sealing before his eyes, blood flowing freely and the muscles ripping and reforming, squiggling like worms before his eyes. The pink flesh quivered and aligned, his skin sloughing off the burned layers, his hair bursting through his scalp.

He put one foot out and found that he could walk. The walk turned to a run as his bone in his injured hand scraped against itself, fragments forcing themselves out through his muscles and skin before falling to the ground as he ran, the remains growing to replace the gap.

His feet moved faster, the distance disappearing between him and his foe at a sickening pace.

“Stop!” he yelled at the masked man, who was almost a hundred feet away from him at this point, almost gone through the gate they had originally entered through.

Amazingly, and perhaps coincidentally, he actually did, perhaps sensing something. The man looked behind him.

“I'm not fucking done with you!” Haverson said, running past Aster's body.

The man turned in surprise, his sword drawing. Haverson slammed into him, lifting him clear off of his feet and tossing him to the ground. The man turned the slide into a roll and came up on his feet. They were now fighting past Aster and closer to the gate.

“I'm going to kill you!” he bellowed, closing quickly, much more quickly than he had thought possible, with the masked man.

Clearly the other man was surprised as well, since he just barely managed to get his sword free when Haverson's first blow connected with him. Haverson had left his sword where he had originally fallen, so it was his fist which connected with the other man's stomach. Haverson heard a satisfying exhale as the wind was driven from the man.

One after another he rained the blows into the man, each one causing the man to visibly shutter. The knuckles of his hands broke with the tenth impact, but he continued his onslaught with the wreaked remains, and was pleased to find, through the pain, that they had rehealed by the time he had raised his hands again for the next attack. The mask showed an expression of surprise for the first time.

Finally though, the other man managed to raise his sword, while moving backwards through the now open gate.

Haverson followed his quickly through the gate before he could run and lashed his fist out. The man stabbed him through the chest again.

What! The pain came again, stronger this time. How?

But after a second Haverson realized what was going on. He stared down at the wound which was already starting to heal even as the man took his sword out of the wound.

Haverson started to laugh.

Haverson advanced on the man, laying blow after blow into him, purposefully advancing constantly to a range where the other man's sword wasn't as effective.

Haverson punched him in the shoulder, rocking the other man's whole body.

The masked man lashed out, cutting Haverson's ear straight off. Haverson laughed as the mangled fold of flesh started to regrow before the shocked man's masked eyes.

Haverson punched, the man caught the blow on his sword. Haverson howled as the blade bit into his fist, then into the bone of his fingers. But he understood how things worked now. He remembered some of the more desperate fights with Germain, and he neither gave into the pain nor allowed the masked man any hint of pleasure.

He grabbed the sword with his other hand, clenching it firmly even as it tore into the flesh of his palm. With one swift motion he ripped it from from the masked man's grasp, blood splattering in an arcing trail with the weapon. A chunk of flesh separated from Haverson's hand, but the site here it came from was already squirming, the bone sealing, the muscles burrowing back into place, the skin stretching over the place the wound had been.

Haverson smashed the other man in the stomach again and again. He tried to land a blow on the man's face, but he dodged out of the way. Even without his sword he was not completely helpless. He produced to knives, and started slashing at Haverson.

The cuts were perhaps the most painful thing Haverson had ever felt in his life, getting stabbed through the stomach included. But the knowledge that he was safe and the revenge that flamed inside him kept him on his feet.

The wounds festered and bubbled as a thin clear liquid was expelled forcibly from his body, the blood stopping as the wounds healed.

“H-How?” The masked man asked. “They're poisoned!” he said, looking down at his weapons in shock. They had clearly never deserted him until now.

Haverson delivered a kick straight to the spot he had punched him earlier and smiled as he felt the man's bones break on impact.

The man let out a confused burbling cough as blood forced its way out of his mouth.

Then Haverson started covering him in punches.

The other man futilely lifted his arms to block the attack, but Haverson kept punching again and again, until he felt something break in the other man's forearm.

The man tried attacking then, but Haverson caught the hand with his own. He locked eyes with the mask, and slowly wrenched the arm to the side, the other man resisting him all the way. But Haverson wasn't done with him. Not just yet.

Haverson continued the hold he had on the man's arm, forcing the man backwards, and downwards until he forced him to the ground. Before the man could rise, Haverson slammed his foot down on the man's ankle, shattering it after a few blows. As the man was writhing, Haverson landed blows on the man's face, one after one another, turning the visage into a bloody mimicry of what it once was.

But it wasn't good enough. He continued, blow after blow until long after the man stopped struggling, until the mask was completely gone, and until he felt the skull split open in his hands.

Haverson lifted the corpse into the air with one hand and dragged it to the edge of the plateau.

A terrible smile ran across Haverson's face as he hurled the body towards a particularly sharp looking pile of boulders several hundred feet below him.

It hit and outlined in blood on impact. It did not move.

Satisfied, Haverson staggered over to Aster's body and collapsed.

Ansalom had served the La Rouche family for decades. His service extended back to his childhood, but when he had followed his uncle around the old corridors of the La Rouche manor, learning how to keep the house properly. Except for a brief stint as a low ranking official in the millitary, it was nearly thirty years of unbroken service. He was a consummate butler and a decent chef. He single handedly commanded a small army of housekeepers, and under his control they kept the house presentable for the La Rouches and especially the Patriarch, Mathis.

However, late at night, after the others had gone off to sleep and the he saw to it that the guards on duty that night had their orders, he sometimes slipped off to the gravel yard, where he would frequent a dimly lit dive called the Underdrink

The other denizens of that gloomy business were not ones to talk, but after about a year, some of the regulars opened up about their pasts.

Because of his position, Ansalom had gotten them to swear they would never reveal where he went at night, but few of them cared. They found a caustic humor that one so well off should come into a place such as the Underdrink.

In such company, after a few drinks, and when pressed, he would admit that he had wanted more in life. When further pressed, he could not explain what more he wanted.

They always joked he needed a wife, but had rejected that suggestion so many times it had become trite.

Truthfully, Ansalom knew that even working under one of the most powerful merchant families of the North, and despite the benefits that his position afforded him, he perhaps would have been more satisfied as his own man, working day and night for himself, and himself only.

Yet, years after Ansalom recognized this truth, it was still him on that day, after all the other staff had gone to sleep, who opened the door that night.

The storm had passed, but the weather was still foul. Because of this, the knocking had come as a surprise.

Ansalom whiped the tiredness from his eyes and put down the stack of accounts he had been preparing for Mr. La Rouche. He stopped for a moment, leaning back in his chair, the wood creaking as he did so. The light of the two candles illuminating the small office flickered from some unseen gust of air and made the shadows of himself and his chair dance upon the walls.

He stared out the door to the office and past the foot of the stairs to the front door. Had he just imagined it?

The knock came again, this time more insistent. No, he had not. It must be important for the guards to have let whoever it was in at such a late hour.

The knock came again.

Ansalom's eyes narrowed, and he rose suddenly and quickly, striding down the hallway. It must be an emergency. His feet swished across the luxurious red carpet, the portraits of his uncle and his uncle's father hung on the cream colored walls of the hall, their frozen eyes staring straight forwards as he rapidly walked past them.

Ansalom came to the foot of the stairs as the knock came again, but weaker this time. His had stretched out to reach towards the doorknob. But something made him stop.

He looked up the dark stairs to where Mr. La Rouche and his wife most likely slept, if the patriarch was not still in his own office. Ansalom's eyes narrowed again, and he slipped the knife that he kept by the door into his palm and held it behind him. It never hurt to be careful. It never hurt to be prepared. There had been previous troubles like this, and guards, even old friends, were not always reliable.

Mentally readying himself, he reached out and opened the door.

The cold night air rushed into the warmth of the house, and the curtains on either side of him billowed. His face took the full force of the gust, a cold and wet force.

Before him was a unknown man with an arm wrapped around his own chest, a dark liquid stained his clothing, and from the smell Ansalom knew instantly what it was. His hand tightened around the knife and he began to move forward.

“Please...” The man said, pleading.

Ansalom stopped in mid motion, the knife still concealed. This man was much older than he at first expected. He was definitely not one of the guards. His hair had just started to go white, and his clothing, a great cloak, and ripped at the edges. Assassins were not usually old men. Assassins did not plead with their targets. Assassins did not appear drenched in blood.

Then Ansalom saw that the man wasn't alone. Slumped on the stoop next to the man, wrapped in a further cloak was immastakably another person, but from its position, it was clear that it was unconscious. But on closer inspection, that cloak was dark as well with blood. A body.

“Who are you? What is the meaning of this?” Ansalom commanded, his voice like steel.

The man shook his head. It was only now that Ansalom noticed that the man seemed to be weeping. For some reason, and for the first moment in a very long time, fear shot through Ansalom.

“Please…” The man said again, then looking up at Ansalom, “Its Aster… Gods, its Aster.”

“Ansalom! This isn't like you at all. I can't remember the last time you've come into my study this late at night, let alone like this.”

“Sir. You must come at once.” Ansalom said, having just burst into the office unannounced.

“Fine, fine, but what could possibly be...” Mathis La Rouche looked up and suddenly locked eyes with the old confidant. Ansalom's wiry frame filled the doorway, illuminated from behind by the sconce in the hallway. His face was cast into shadow, but from that shadow, his eyes blazed. A chill descended upon the patriarch.

“Sir. You must come at once.” He repeated, his voice firm. The tone wasn't a suggestion. It was a command.

Mathis's eyes widened and he grabbed the letter opener on his desk as he rose. There had only been two times Ansalom had ever spoken to him like that. Both had been attempts on his life.

“Where are they? We need to wake Ethalia! She is in the second bedroom.” He said, leaping to his feet.

“This is not an attack on your life.” Ansalom said. “Yet you must come at once. It would not be proper of me to describe this. You should see it yourself.”

Ansalom lead Mathis towards the front door at a quick pace. The mansion passed around them like a blur, and as Mathis's mind raced, Ansalom clarified, “And it is not Ethalia either. She is well, but I do not think you should wake her just yet.”

Ansalom took a quick series of turns, bringing them through the servants corridors and through the seldom used dark ballroom. The hard wood echoed as their strides resounded on the floor, echoing through the empty house. Their shadows cast long against the sliver of light from behind them, running along the expensive wallpaper, countless paintings and reflecting in the inky pools of dark mirrors.

“I have already sent for Mr. Marteband.” Ansalom said, the two exiting the ballroom. “Although honestly I believe there is little he can do at this stage.”

“Mr. Marteband? Is someone injured?” Mathis asked. But Ansalom was silent, and merely threw open the door to the kitchen.

Mathis entered the room, one of the many that he did not frequent often, and looked straight ahead of him as Ansalom held the door. A body lay on the large preparation table in the center of the room. Several sconses had been lit, but the kitchen had not been designed to be used at night. The room was still dark and he could not make out the features of the body.

He heard a sound from the side of the room and saw a man, his head buried deep in his knees, his hands folded in submission beneath his forehead.

“Ansalom. What is this? Who is this?” He demanded, spinning to look at the butler.

The old man's face was creased deeply, a horrible frown printed on his countenance. Ansalom shook his head and winced. “I'm so sorry old friend. Its Aster.”

The room spun. The shadows ran a deep blue across the ground, across the body, the dark shapes of kitchen equipment resting on the counters. The individual cobblestones became apparent to Mathis, each one pressfitted snugly against the rest. Atop these, the same shadows lay, before burning bright across that divide into the imprint that the sconces left. Flickering orange and blue.

He remembered walking slowly across the room. The table lay before him, and even though the task was insurmountable, his feet bore him there. He remembered every footstep. His hand reached forward by its own volition and when it exteneded infront of his vision, Mathis could see that it shook. The body lay before him, already starting to stain the wood of the table underneath.

His fingers wrapped around wet and cold, blood soaked cloak. He felt the coarse material between his fingers. The top side was slick and cold to the touch, the bottom only slightly less so. He gritted his teeth, and his hand slid to the side, peeling away the covering from the body's face.

An inhuman cry issued from his mouth and echoed down the hall and through the dark and empty house.

Tears streamed down from his face unstoppably. His hand holding the blood stained cloak shook more violently. He found himself breathing large breaths of air, yet somehow all of them refused to fill his lungs, forcing him to take one after another.

Before him, Aster lay. And it could only be her. The long blond hair that had always tangled so horribly, the mark on the left cheek from when she had burned herself on something from the stovetop… But the face… Gods… It was a broken shattered thing, still spilling blood, wet with rain and other fluids. Beneath the fleshy mess of the wound, he could stare straight into… and there were fragments of bone peaking out from the gash, little pieces of white shards, like the first fallen flakes of snow among red fall leaves… One eye still lay in its socket, the pupil a small pool of green brown staring lifelessly up at the ceiling.

“Aster...” he choaked, his hands letting the fabric fall from his fingers. He forced himself to look straight at the ruined face, to remember the little girl who had left him so long ago. His fingers traced the iintact parts of her forehead before running into the mess of sandy hair. There they caught and refused to go further. When he looked, he saw the strands had caked together with dried blood.

Bile rose swiftly in his stomach and Ansalom appeared out of nowhere with a large pot. The butler looked away.

Mathis wiped his mouth and looked again at Aster. He had not seen her for almost ten years, and in that time had welly and truly changed from a rebellious child into a young woman. He figured she would have rivaled him in height. He could not look away.

She wore leather armor, dark bands held the collection together. He did not ignore the many scores along that armor, nor the fact that by her side there was an empty scabbard. She wore simple tan trousers, the kind of outdoor gear they issued the members of the military. There were dark leather boots on her feet, still dripping mud. Across her arms, which lay bare, were several scars, some inches long.

He choked again. He could not deny what he was seeing, yet his mind could not allow him to understand it either. Wasn't it just yesterday that he had been running after her through the gardens? Or scolding her when she sneaked into his office? Had it been so long when he used to hear of her misadventures with her two younger brothers or the constant fights with Ethalia or her tutor over her lessons?

It had. It had been a long time. Winters had come and gone. Summers had changed into Autumn and the hope that he had held of seeing her again had faded, when his men had found nothing and no one, and it became clear that she was gone for good.

Perhaps that had been the worst part of it. There had been no ransom note, there had been so sign of a struggle. No body, no sightings. She had simply disappeared on a cold winter day when the frost had gathered on the windows. And that had been the end of it.

And after almost half a year of searching, and thousands of gold spent, when Ethalia refused to talk to him about it any more and even his business partners tried to convince him to move on, only then had he the audacity to understand that she was gone.

But now she was back. But in what state? Gods… There was nothing Mr. Martebrand could do for her. That much was clear. That had been clear from the beginning, from the first second he had revealed the damage. Whoever had done this had been brutal.

He stopped and looked up at the unknown man in the chair off to the side. Ansalom gave him something to wipe his mouth with other than his hand, and he did so.

“And w-who are you?” he managed, voice still cracking with residual emotion. The last word tinged with a bit of venom. Who was this man who had brought his daughter to him, dead and mutilated so?

“D-Did you do this?” He asked, fists tightening. His eyes focused on the bent over figure.

The man in the chair let out some sort of exhausted choke, and looked up. The man's eyes were bloodshot and his clothing stained deep with blood. Interestingly, despite the man still favoring his side, and the tearing of the clothing at that location, Mathis could see no fresh blood. Had the man healed himself?

The man shook his head and stared at Mathis, his eyes filling with dispair as they slid past the patriarch and back to Aster's body.

“No.” The man said, finally. “But I killed the one who did.”