

Tales of Old Volume 2: As Darkness Rises

~Excerpt from Chapter 13~

<<<Ellarass>>>

The mist had crawled hungrily farther and farther into the port as the hours crept by. So that now it shifted fitfully about the knees of men and women all along the river front, and there were men and women there, in great number indeed. From his lofty perch, Ellarass watched them all milling about upon their late night errands. This too had not changed in the decades since he had last stalked these streets under another name. At times, the throngs here had been a blessing to him; he had disappeared into their milling masses like water into water, but tonight was different. Tonight his role had changed, he was the one ensuring that others didn't disappear. He could see them now, of that he was becoming more and more certain, the men and elves who had no idea that he was protecting them. It felt good to be saving lives he thought, but then a part of him knew that in order to do so he would have to kill tonight, and it was very likely that the King's Men would come with the greater numbers.

Sam stood beside his fellow Deft Hands. Their faces were shrouded behind gray cowls like his, but he could see the anxiety in their eyes was as urgent as his own. None of them liked the idea of being the one who sold the scepter back to the King's Men. The Deft Hands knew their royal overlord well enough to see through the facade that he was a jolly fat simpleton. The truth was far more sinister, and it was one that their organization knew well. The king was cunning and cruel. More than once he had had their agents savagely brutalized in order to make an example of what happened to thieves, and that was before they themselves had gone and made it personal. Sam shivered from the cold as the wet air of the night seeped into his bones, or was it dread that he felt, he couldn't be certain.

Something caught his eye in the crowd that bustled past, or rather the lack of something. He and his fellows occupied an alleyway between two old boat houses at the water's edge. It was motion, a handful of figures had stopped moving and were staring at them from out of the crowd. Everyone else passed them by, so that they were consumed by the throng, only to re-emerge again once the way was made clear. They were garbed in long red cloaks with golden brocade, *King's Men* he knew without so much as a second thought. He was right, they move forward haphazardly through the crowd, two of them carrying a chest between them, four others following in the wake of the pair. Sam had expected more, if the King was sending assassins to kill them this would not be enough to do so. He did not know if he should be relieved or suspicions, and so his mind settled upon an uneasy anxiety somewhere in the middle.

"You have what we came for?" one of the red cloaked men asked in a high voice. Sam looked to his superior, she had given up her normal green robes for grey this night, in order to be less conspicuous. However, a green hem still threaded its way around every item in her attire. She had never disclosed her name to him, not in all of his time here, nor it seemed had she done so to anyone else. Miss Green, or M'lady in Green were the two titles he had heard her addressed by. *A perfect thief* he thought, one with a trademark as simple as a color, hard to forget but impossible to distinguish.

"We do." She said, veiling her strong accent completely with a tone that sounded perfectly common. "And you? Have you brought what we have called for?"

"You can see that well enough," the speaker in red replied harshly, indicating to the chest his companions carried between them.

“I see a box,” the Lady in Green replied shrewdly. Sam could almost hear her eyes narrowing from the tone of her voice. “What is within remains uncertain.”

“Awfully suspicious for a crook there aren’t you?” The man asked back goadingly. “Very well, men. Open it up,” he paused looking around. “Might we do this somewhere a bit more, private?”

“This is private enough,” she replied her patience wearing thin. “Open the chest here, or return to your bloated king empty-handed,” her words cut cold and sharp like an arrow through the fog. The man appeared to bite back a retort sucking in his lip and thinking as fast as his mind would allow. He was new to this command, Sam realized with a frown, almost feeling sorry for the man. Nalmennell’s king had many puppets, and more than a few hadn’t asked for their strings.

“Very well,” Indargos said the fight evidently flowing out of him. “We’ll do it here.”

The King’s Man gestured to his fellows, who promptly lowered the chest to the damp cobbled stones and began working at the lock. Trying with all of his might to remain stately and elegant despite the chill in his bones and the nervous thoughts racing through his mind, Indargos found himself suddenly longing for that time not so very long ago when the extent of his duties was to great dignitaries beyond the city gates. But then Endrith of the Eldaren-Wayne had come, and he had spoken at just the right moment to gain attention. Now this was his reward, he had been elevated in a day’s time to a position of *importance* in the king’s court. In truth, he had imagined it all rather differently: accommodations within the palace grounds, a bigger bed and bath, maybe a few servants and slaves of his own.

The lock clicked open, and Indargos’ naïve mind drifted back to reality. He was still just an errand boy, only now, his errands involved foggy wharfs and hidden daggers; two things he had little love for.

“You see,” he said indicating towards the sea of golden coins within the chest between himself and the criminals he was tasked to deal with. “All accounted for, now return what you have taken.” His tone sounded as harsh and justified as he had intended, but he puffed his chest for good measure just to prove his point. He was on official royal business after all, even if it had led him to a gutter like this.

Ellarass scoffed at the puffed up peacock of a man speaking in the assembly below him, recognizing Indargos from their meeting where he himself had first filled Endrith’s role. *Royal fool*, he thought gliding unseen along the point of a steeply roofed structure, across the street from the alleyway in which the none-to-discrete transaction was taking place. Nothing would happen here anytime soon, instead he was scanning the rest of the bystanders warily, though he knew not exactly what for. *Anything*, he supposed his gaze gliding hawkishly from one detail to another in the world crawling slowly by beneath his perch. He moved with a practiced discretion, but in truth most of the tricks of his trade were unneeded tonight, because tonight he was no longer the Archer of the Eyes, no, now he was something else entirely.

Endrith’s armor was astonishingly light and forgiving in design despite being nearly impervious, allowing him to move and bend as if he were garbed only in cloth. However, the masterpiece had one fatal flaw, the black gemlike metal reflected every glimmer of light, even the light of a moon half hidden behind the vapors in the air. That was why he had something else as well, something that Endrith seemed to have forgotten was in his possession. The cloak of thread-fine chains was a little loose across his chest and shoulders, but it served its purpose well just the same. He was all but invisible when stationary, and when he moved, he appeared as a ripple in the air, like a stone dropped in a quiet pool. It changed things to be so nearly undetectable. It was every assassin’s dream, and now for him, it was reality. Why Endrith had used this masterpiece only once, Ellarass didn’t know, nor did it really matter to him. He supposed, for Endrith, with so many gifts and abilities as he had come into over the past half-decade, it must have been difficult to keep track of them all. Ellarass smiled to himself behind the faceless helm he had been given, amused by his own internal narration, but a moment later his sentiment was washed away. At last, his eyes discerned a different movement amongst the hive-like motion beneath his roost.

The deal was done, the Deft Hands and their courtly counterparts were heading their separate ways, and just at the edge of view he saw the others moving as well. The time was now.

Ellarass slipped his sickle blade from under his vale of shrouded chains. He watched the red-cloaked assembly turn one direction, and the grey-hooded group turn another, before slinking back into the shadows to hunt those who thought themselves hunters.

<<<Sam>>>

Sam allowed himself a calm breath at long last, as the chest he and another Deft Hand carried, jarred back and forth between them. It stunk of royal perfumes, but at least those weren't dangerous. He recalled every detail of the exchange. The Lady in Green had checked the gold for enchantments and found none, so it seemed perhaps the king would be good to his word after all. He himself had produced the scepter from a hidden pocket within his own tunic once his superior was satisfied that the gold was safe. The King's Men had made an involuntary step forward as an entire group the moment the rod of wavelike gold was revealed. Sam had halted, the invaluable object in his hand. The nine grey hooded companions behind him had all flinched toward the daggers in their sleeves as a premeditated response to the movement of their guests. But the moment had passed with not a drop of bloodshed, and with hardly a comment more, the King's Men had turned back to the crowd and disappeared into the night, leaving him and his fellow Hands alone in the alley of swirling mist.

They turned a corner, coming off the larger road and into another alleyway. This one was longer and connected one byway of the river front to another, but they had no interest in the other large street. Instead, they stopped and ducked through a low doorway into an abandoned house that served as a staging point over one of the largest grates to the main water line along the entire river front. How the Hands had come to own this place, Sam had no idea, but it was as unsuspecting and ordinary as any house like it in this part of the city. As they passed through the grey dusty rooms of the structure, half a dozen cowed figures greeted them silently from the corners and fell in line behind them, swelling their numbers to an even fourteen. The heavy chest made an obstacle for them with every single turn, until at last their entire assembly reached the run down kitchen and they came to a halt. Their leader nodded for them to rest as she opened the way ahead.

Sam lowered himself into one of the creaky wooden chairs around a dusty table at the kitchen's center. The chest was heavier than he had expected, but despite the wiriness of his own form he was better suited to carry it than most of his fellows, the majority of whom were a head and neck shorter than himself. He was rather tall for a thief, too gangly for acrobatics, too long-limbed for tight spaces, but at least he weighed more than the chest of gold they were carrying. He accepted a water skin for one of his fellows with a small smile, allowing the enchanted artwork tattooed on his face to mirror his gratitude. They were no longer in public after all, so he could wipe away the disguise his enchantments had molded into and allow his own face to return. As he handed back the water skin, the dark brown eyes he had seen the world through for the past hour, faded back to green. The she elf returned the water skin to her hip, before spinning around the nearest chair and drawing it towards him.

Sam recognized the excitement burning bright in the hazel blue eyes staring at him from behind the cowl that she elf wore. She sat facing him, her chin resting on the back of her chair and a smile in her voice as she spoke,

"A spider," she said expectantly in a playful whisper. Sam knew the voice even better than the eyes; they had been assigned to at least half a dozen heists together over the past few months. Her name was Hannah, and if his height made him a bad thief, then her talkativeness made her a worse one. Yet he couldn't say no to the anticipation in those eyes, after all, it was only a harmless game, and they had used it to pass the time more than once before.

He pulled down his cowl with a sigh, refusing to acknowledge how relieving it was to free his face from the fabric. He allowed the magic of his skin to adopt the pattern of a spider on his cheek.

“A red spider,” Hannah whispered a little louder than before, her smile spreading as she pulled down her hood and cowl as well to reveal a freckled youthful face, and cheeks that were rosy with excitement. Sam raised his eyebrow allowing a larger red spider to materialize out of it and scurry down his face to devour the first spider where it covered upon his cheek. Hannah repressed a shriek of joy as she watched the magic move artistically across Sam’s skin.

“Lightning!” she said. “Do lightning again like last time! With the clouds and the smoke!” Sam complied, and a storm danced across his face until one bolt smote the spider and it exploded into a cloud of red ash that settled above his upper lip. It fell in a way that looked perfectly like a close cut red mustache. Hannah snickered and was opening her mouth to make yet another request, but she fell suddenly silent. The Lady in Green stepped away from the mantel of a dusty fireplace behind Sam, swinging a section of the wall outwards along with her. Without a word the thieves rose from their seats around the room. Those who had lowered their cowls raised them again in a swift practiced motion as they stood. Together, their assembly glided forward towards the gaping maw of stone that descended in front of them. Sam sighed as he took up one end of the chest full of gold, while another of his hooded brothers took the other. Hannah squeezed his arm as she slipped past him whispering so that only he could hear. “We’ll play more later, when we make it back.” Sam didn’t reply, he could feel the Lady in Green’s eyes hovering over him and the gold he was carrying.

As they moved into the darkness, she pulled the opening to the passage shut behind them, engulfing their congregation in void for a number of seconds. Sam’s ear caught the sound of finger’s snapping behind them and a cool green glow spread through the tunnel. He knew better than to turn around and stare at the single spark of green flame that was at that very moment dancing half an inch from the tips of his mistress’s fingers. He had stared at it over long once before, and woken up some six days later, still seeing the rumor of it floating through his vision. As far as he knew, the Green Lady was gifted only in illusions and tricks of magic, but they were powerful tricks that could have lasting effects; his face was evidence enough of that. The man on the other side of the chest stumbled half a step on a loose stone, barely managing to recover his footing. Sam shook himself, pulling his attention away from his memories about the origin of the magic that flowed through the flesh of his face. He refocused his attention to the important task of putting one foot in front of the other. He was on a mission after all, even if he was merely a beast of burden, he still had a job to do.

<<< Indargos >>>

Indargos scowled at his feet as he walked, dejected that he, the one bearing the king’s authority on this endeavor, was forced to follow as others led. He glanced up at the six of them, too scared to stare over long at the ruddy cracked leather and rusting dark metal that made up the garb of these *specialists* whom his lord kept in his employ. They were a unique asset, and one that his grace hoarded jealously, these muttering eccentrics from their crooked tower.

Spiders, that was what the lay people of the city called them, and now that he saw them up close, the name seemed fitting. Indargos has been born in this city, he had been raised in it, and all his life he had been told to stay as far away from that tower as possible. When he was younger, he had believed the same stories than many of the people shrinking away from their procession likely still believed now. “The spiders were necromancers,” his older brother had told him when they were both only boys “*they once used blood magic to get power from the dead so they could live forever, but they ran out of magic hundreds of years ago, so they have to use other means now.*” Of course, he was no longer a child, and knew better than to believe such stories. Even so, there was a grain of truth in every lie ever told, and whatever they truly were, felt strangely cold and unclean to him, like something crawling just beneath his skin. The official claim, of course, was that the spiders were men and elves of knowledge and learning, intent only upon better understanding the mysteries of life, death and madness. They would have people believe that their cause was noble, that the criminals they took from the Long Halls of Long Bars

to their Spider's Tower were being rehabilitated and would someday be released. Indargos could not think of a single soul who had ever been released after the spiders began their experiments. They kept their faces hidden within loose rough spun sacks of the kind of course fabric that one could half see through when it was pressed close enough against one's face. This added an almost comical air to the perverse strangeness of their appearance: a shapeless mass of fabric with no eyeholes, no opening to speak or eat, not even slits through which to breathe, sitting atop the leathery shoulders of sporadically moving bodies. He wasn't particularly interested in looking overly long, but from what he saw there appeared to be no point where the sack ended and the clothing began. They almost looked stitched together on some of the spiders. *True spiders* he thought *cocooned away from the world within their own webs.*

They turned abruptly down an alleyway off the main road and for a moment Indargos saw a small creature that one of their number kept clutched tightly in his leather gloved hands. It was some kind of slender rodent akin to a ferret, but different than any he had ever seen. Before he could look at it closer, the spider covered the creature with its sleeve and hissed at him, shuffling farther down the alley. Indargos smirked to himself as the spider scurried away ahead of him. *Not necromancers* he thought to himself *just eccentrics with tricks hidden up their sleeves.* He stopped at the corner of the alleyway and watched the six peculiar figures as they shuffled past one house after another, stopping at long last in front of a rundown towering shack of a building and turning back to glare at him from beneath their leather hoods.

They had found what they were looking for. Indargos stepped back out into the main street and waited there patiently as his fellow King's Men materialized out of the crowd one by one, each with four or five hired cut-throats in tow. There were always men willing to work for their king's gold, so long as one knew where to look. These men had been hired as a company half a dozen times before, so when Indargos had come knocking at their door earlier that evening, they had taken one look at the red of his cloak, emptied the various bottles and mugs in their hands, and fallen readily in line.

Once everyone was assembled, six red cloaks and nearly thirty ruff clad brigands, he knew it was time. This was the moment of authority he had been waiting for. Indargos threw back his cloak, drawing a long narrow sword from his hip as his fellow kings men did likewise. Turning he marched boldly down the alley to where the spiders huddled before the stoop of the rundown building. They shuffled aside at his coming giving way, he thought, to the authority of the king he served. Indargos looked up at the structure looming above him as the cut-throats fanned out around it, ensuring that no one would escape through a back door. It was a desperate looking place: windows boarded up, wood rotting through from the damp air. Even as he watched, a shingle of wood fell away from its roof despite the absence of wind. Men who called such a place as this their base of operations could truly fall no lower. He steeled himself, now was not the moment for pity, it was the moment for glory, he had waited his whole life for a moment like this, the chance to wield real power. All he had to do was act.

The door gave way to his shoulder, its rotting wood crumbling away and crashing to the ground as he led the charge into the first room, bright sword raised above his head. "For the king!" he bellowed searching for movement amidst the gloom as he charged forward. He could hear his cry echoing from the mouths of his red cloaked companions. "For the king!" they called, fanning out into two different directions, spreading through the house with swift purpose. Indargos burst across one threshold after another, certain that in the next room he would find his prey cowering together for safety. But he never did.

<<<Ellarass>>>

Ellarass had to hold back his laughter as he listened to the zeal fade from the voices bellowing below him with each new yell. He sat on the rooftop and listened, watching as the mercenaries lazily followed after their employers once the yells of "for the king" had faded to silence. He could hear one or two of them repeating the call jokingly to each other as they passed through the broken in door. "Ey, you hear who we're looking for?" one of them said elbowing his friend in the ribs

with a thick hairy arm. “Deft Hand’s I heard it was.” The man replied, “Nah,” the first speaker said back. “We’re looking For The King.”

With that, the last of them disappeared inside, Ellarass counted their heads as they went: twenty-eight sell swords, with the six king’s men, that made for a total of thirty four. Not too high of a number. But then expensive sell swords were expensive for a reason, they were at least good enough at their job to survive and collect their fee. But by the looks of things, The Deft Hands had managed a clean getaway all on their own... unless.

He eyed the six figures still huddling in the alleyway warily, certain that they would be able to pick up the trail again, if it interested them. The spiders and he had crossed paths before. They stared right back up at him unwaveringly, veiled eyes searching the space where he should have been, despite the darkness of the night and the cloak that kept him concealed from their eyes. They couldn’t see him, but somehow they knew that there was something there, something out of place in the place he should have been. They had first looked up as the shingle broke free beneath his foot. Endrith’s armor may have been lighter than most armor, but it still added enough weight to sully his usual grace, or so he told himself, perhaps he was just rusty. At any rate, it had been enough to catch their attention, which was more than could be said for the cacophony going on inside the house beneath him. From the sound of things, the King’s Men had set their minions to tearing the place apart, not that it would do them much good. Earlier Ellarass had hooked his sickle into the roofing and dangled from it, allowing him to peer through a crack between the boards over a window into the kitchen. There, hanging precariously like a fish on a hook, he had seen it all, watching as an elfish woman ran her hands along the stones under the mantle with delicate precision, before swinging a whole section of wall open. Such a procedure would not be managed by mere chance.

He returned his mind to the foes at hand, they were creeping slowly closer to him, almost drifting, as if drawn in against their will and by curiosity alone, perhaps they were afraid because they didn’t understand, or perhaps it was because they did. He had to stay still now, a single ripple in the chain concealing him would give everything away, that much was certain. He thought about the bow across his back and the quiver at his hip, 40 arrows for 40 lives. He would have two left to spare, but this was not the place he would have chosen. There were too many routes out, too many directions to escape, and if he was seen, even for a moment, he couldn’t afford for a single survivor. The spider at the front of the assembly reached out its arm, producing a small ferret like creature with red eyes no bigger than pen pricks, it was sniffing the air rabidly, and as it opened its mouth he saw not teeth, but a second nose where the back of its throat should have been. Ellarass allowed his hand to inch towards his bow. He knew exactly what creature he was looking at, a species bred by magical means, means outlawed centuries ago for their cruelty. Suddenly, he understood how the spiders had been able to trace their prey here so easily. They must have doused the gold with specific scents, expensive perfumes most likely, that to the thieves, would have seemed just another nescience expected from their highborn overlords. Even magical means of looking for a trace on the gold or the chest wouldn’t have noted a thing out of place, because smells weren’t spell, they were natural, but with the right unnatural set of nostrils, they were just as effective. It was a clever trick, one that had been used against him before, a long time ago. His hand closed on the shaft of his bow.

“They’re not here!” Indargos boomed thundering out of the house and bearing foolishly down upon the six figures waiting in the street, breaking their concentration on the roof top. “What are you playing at? There’s no one inside.” The man moved between the Spiders’ and Ellarass’ line of sight, obscuring them from his view, and him from theirs. Light as a feather on the wind, Ellarass glided backwards to the far end of the roof without being noticed. The spiders hissed their dissent backing away from Indargos as he brandished his sword over them. “You were wrong!” he boomed like an angry child “You were wrong, you were wrong, you were wrong!” Suddenly one of the spiders caught him by the wrist, Indargos tried to wrench free but to no avail, his hand was already going cold as a sensation like fire shot down his arm, spreading farther and farther with every beat of his heart. He tried to scream but found his jaw locked shut, foam was flowing from the corners of his mouth and something red was swimming through his vision. His knees gave way but he could not fall, the

spider held him up by his wrist. With its other hand the leather hooded figure pulled Indargos' head back and whispered in an uncannily normal voice, "We. Are. Never. Wrong."

It released its victim, allowing the high-born man to collapse. He was left in a twitching puddle on the cold mist swept stones in a nameless alleyway. The spider looked back up at the roof and scowled.

"It is gone." One of the others hissed the air billowing through the rough spun sack in front of its mouth.

"Which means it wassss there." Another whispered with a snarl that sounded as if it came from a mouth without teeth.

"Truth, but gather. We hold authority now, and as such, the blame in failure," the one standing over Indargos' corpse replied. "Their king expects our reputation. We will live up to it. We are never wrong." The others nodded sullenly one after another before moving into the house as one, and walking straight way towards the kitchen. Ellarass watched them go in silence, his eyes drawn to the man still stirring fitfully where he lay on the stones of the alleyway. One minute passed. Then another. He listened as the other King's Men and their mercenaries fell silent before the Spiders as they moved through the house beneath him. He listened as the stones of the fireplace and their mantel slid aside. He listened to the lighting of lanterns and the patter of many feet descending down the steps. Then the stones slid across the floor once again and there was silence.

He moved, sliding down the loose roofing with a shower of shingles, but it didn't matter. There was no one left to watch, as it was late now, truly late, late enough to be called early by some. He stalked across the stones as nothing more than a ripple, splitting the mist like an unexplained gust of wind, and knelt over Indargos where he lay. There was no blood on the stones. The only crimson flowing out beneath him was the fabric of his own cloak. Yet he was dead: his skin was pallor grey green, his eyes white and glazed, foam down his front that appeared to have flowed from the corners of his mouth, his lips blue, dry and cracked. Ellarass furrowed his brow, slipping his sickled blade out from the void of his cloak and hooking it around the corpse's arm. He raised it to his eye so that he could see the wrist and there it was. As he had expected, a swollen welt, postulating and inflamed with a single indent at its center. He produced an arrow from the quiver at his hip and softly pressed it to the welt. The swollen skin burst as the steel tip grazed it. Clear fluid flowed out of the space with a smell so strong he almost gagged within his helmet, but then he saw it. The stinger washed out with the liquid, flowing down across the dead man's arm and all the way it went the skin it touched became inflamed and began to swell as well. Ellarass let the limb fall in disgust, looking at the abandoned house looming over him. He sheathed his blade and pulled his long elegant bow from his back, throwing his weight and strength into stringing it before pulling it back close to him. He concealed it within the folds of the fine chains of his cloak before moving forward. His enemies chose venom as their weapon, it was a deadly choice, but now he knew to watch for the sting. The hunt had begun.

<<<Sam>>>

It can't be that much farther now Sam thought, his arm aching from the weight of the reeking chest dragging down upon his shoulder. There was someone new on the other side of the gold now, another short nimbly built man wheezing away at the weight of the chest. Sam had to stop himself from laughing when he looked at him. His companion could probably have crammed himself into the chest they were carrying, and he didn't care what sort of stuff a person could be made of, no one was as dense as gold. It had been slow going through the dripping tunnels of the main line because of the weight of the gold. They had stopped more than a few times to trade out carries, or in Sam's case, simply to switch hands. The Lady in Green followed just behind him, her hand raised so that the walls of the tunnel all around them danced with flickering green light. After a number of near-misses, with weary feet and loose stones she had decided to provide them a little more light. After all, this whole endeavor would be for not if they slipped and spilled the contents of the chest into

flowing water running beside them. If they could hardly carry it on land, they had no hope at all of swimming with it or retrieving it from the water.

Beyond their sphere of flickering green light, everything was darkness. It is nearly impossible to see what lies behind a light one is looking into. Sam recognized the five way cross-section between different branches of their aquatic labyrinth. They were getting close now, a few hundred meters farther and they would have reached the doorway. He breathed a sigh of relief before collecting himself for the single file crossing over a narrow bridge that traversed the intersecting waterways. If carrying the chest side by side was difficult, walking backwards with it was insanity, but he had done just so seven times already. What was an eighth trial now?

He backed along the stones, going at the head of the procession whilst the others waited and watched nervously, talking and fidgeting amongst each other while they waited. Sam reached the far side, it was only a few more steps before they were in the clear. Suddenly, he saw something was wrong: the look in his counterpart's eyes was terrified, he had lost his footing. Sam jerked backwards on the chest as the man began to fall sideways towards the water. He saw the smaller figure's grip break free as he made to catch himself by instinct. Twisting himself as best he could with the weight of the gold buffeting into him, Sam grasped for the grey cowl as it disappeared from view down into the water way.

The noise was like an avalanche. The chest crashed into Sam's body as he pulled it away from the water's edge, knocking him roughly to the wet stone with a smack of flesh. His companion shrieked as he fell out of sight. Sam lay there, chest atop him, one arm still holding it, the other locked in a death grip on the fabric of the back of a grey cowl, still attached to the flailing figure of a frightened man. He grunted from the pain as the others rushed to his aid. The stony corner over the water's edge was cut at a sharp angle that dug into his flesh just above his elbow. His arm itself was bowing backwards at a dangerous angle, he could feel the joint about to snap. Muscles were tearing from the weight of an entire body dangling from his lower arm, and there was nothing he could do to re-position himself, not with the chest of gold pinning him down. Finally, many hands were beside him. Two reached over the edge and dragged the man who had fallen to safety, while several others heaved the chest off Sam's body. After several intense moments of pushing, pulling, grunting and cursing the crisis was abated. Six of them sat there panting on the damp stones flickering with green light, whilst the others stood about them. The Woman in Green knelt over Sam where he sat, taking his arm in one hand, while amplifying the green light in her other to better see the damage that had been done.

"Not broken," she whispered, relief evident in her voice. "You did your Hands proud today young one." She pulled down her green hemmed cowl as she spoke. "You did your Lady in Green proud as well." She bent forward and kissed him softly on the brow. Her lips lingering there for a moment unabashed as the whole company watched in silence. None of them had ever seen the fair face hidden behind that cowl. Suddenly, she jerked away from him, standing to stare down the tunnel behind them. Sam had heard it too, footsteps in the darkness.

She snapped her fingers, snuffing out the light around them to better see what was farther off in the darkness. Sam rose and strained his eyes as the flickering light faded away, perceiving for half a moment what might have been lantern light, but it died out so soon after their own green light, that he couldn't be sure if it was only a trick of the reflections on the water. He came to his feet as quietly as he could, listening as those sitting around him did likewise, his eyes fixating on the direction they had come. His hand felt for the long knife he kept inside his cloak. Darkness pressed in upon them. The world was made of only the sound of the water racing by beneath them, his heart racing even faster, and the forcefully calm breaths of those gathered around him.

Then he heard something else, snuffling. A shrill inhuman cackle cut through the air like a fish through water, reverberating and echoing off the walls so that it seemed like it came from a thousand directions. They had been found.

The Woman in Green flooded the tunnel with a sea of blinding yellow-green light, secrecy would no longer serve them. The cackles turned into shrieks as half a dozen faceless figures shrunk back from the light, reaching up with their gloved hands to shield their eyes, but before the Deft Hands could press their advantage a horde of hulking figures swarmed

forward, swords, axes and bludgeons in hand. Several mercenaries ripped the covers off their concealed lanterns, others stopped long enough to strike flint into oil soaked torches that had been kept ready for just this moment, overpowering the green light with red as they charged across the narrow stone bridge and engulfed the band thieves. Sam swung with his knife, catching the first man across the bridge by surprise, as the narrow steel sunk into his chest. As the body fell away, landing with a splash in the water below, he looked up to see the red light of an oil soaked torch angling towards his face. Heat and light engulfed him as he was knocked to the ground by the blow. He lay there on the stones squinting up at his brother and sisters through the pain.

Three grey cowed corpses lay on the stones beside him already, their daggers all but useless against the larger weapons of their larger foes. He watched as the light faded from a pair of hazel blue eyes set in a freckled face in the ground beside him.

“Fire.” He heard her whisper clean and clear through the thunder of battle raging around them. Four hulking men splashed down in the water, cast backwards by a burst of light as the Lady in Green called the last few of her Hands in close around her, but Sam hardly noticed. “Your face,” Hannah breathed her eyes focusing and un-focusing “I’m sorry... I, I was, I was going to ask... for fire.” She reached towards him with a hand soaked in her own blood and pushed as hard as she could manage, rolling him off the edge into the water below.

Cold and wet rushed up to meet him like a wall, smacking into his face and side. It was like he was waking up from a dream. The haze was gone, and though he was still in agony it felt like a dull ache compared to what he had experienced a moment before. He spat out a mouthful of liquid as he broke the surface of the water. Above him he could still hear the struggle taking place, some of the others were still alive. Heaving with all his might he caught hold of the stone wall in front of him, holding on against the rushing current and wrenching himself out of the water. Sam scampered over the edge just in time to see five leather cloaked faceless figures close in around his Lady in Green. As she held herself up against a blood-soaked stone wall, a sixth was stooping over the bodies of his friends with one hand lifting up a freckled face, that was now pale and void of signs of life.

He heard the roar escape his lips without knowing that he was yelling. He felt himself move forward without commanding his legs to run. He had a sword in his hand, one that he must have taken from the ground, or perhaps from the water below. He had no idea, but one thing was certain: he felt the rage boiling through his veins, contorting his face into a visage of wrath and sorrow so terrible to behold that the experienced sell swords fell back before him as he cut down first one, then another, then a third. The Spider rose, but it rose too slow and his blade fell swiftly, cleaving clean across a pair of shoulders and sending a seeping rough spun sack rolling across the floor.

Something struck him in his side, he swung back at the mercenary who had hit him, but the man ducked away and another attacker buried an axe in his leg. He went down to one knee, thrusting through the gut of the man standing over him as the Spiders turned from their victim to watch the struggle. They had such an immense appetite for pain. Try as he might, Sam could not wrench the sword free from the man’s body, it had sunk deep, wedging itself in the bone. He looked up at the warriors standing over him as a man cloaked in red lay a slender blade upon his collarbone, before drawing it back and preparing to strike.

The head of an arrow broke through the King’s Man’s chest at such speed that it passed straight through, leaving a gaping hole in his chest. The warriors looked around at the darkness beyond their fire light in alarm as the Spiders hissed to each other. Another barb sung out from the darkness meeting its mark in a man’s head with such force that he was thrown back against the wall. The mercenaries panicked, brandishing their blades and torches, rushing forward in groups of two or three into the darkness only to die screaming at the hands of an unseen foe.

Unseen, Ellarass leapt the breath of the waterway, firing once from the air and twice more once he reached solid footing. They charged forward in the direction the arrows had come as he flattened himself against the wall, allowing four

cut-throats to slip past him before drawing his pair of sickled blades. They flashed out from beneath his chain cloak for only an instant at a time. But with each movement, a body collapsed limp and broken to the ground.

Silent as the void, he glided towards the rest of his prey, coming like an owl amongst mice suddenly out of the darkness, and swooping away once more beyond their sight. Sam stared in disbelief, as with a flash of silver two men fell dead seemingly from nothing, less than a foot from where he knelt unable to stand from the axe buried in his leg. The Spiders were pressed back to back against each other looking in all directions, but whatever this new terror was, it avoided them until the last, carving through the mercenaries two or three at a time and shooting down any that ventured to flee into the tunnel.

Sam dragged himself backwards towards the wall, his heart racing as death was dealt swiftly all around him. He found himself pressed against one of the mercenaries. They turned and met each other's eyes and Sam saw his own terror reflected in them. A bright blood-stained sickle materialized before them, as if from thin air, and hooked itself up through the bottom of the mercenary's jaw. Sam jerked away as he saw the blade slip back into the folds of some ripple within the air. He listened as nearly silent footsteps led the menace away towards another foe.

At last the final cut-throat fell, his lantern crashing to the stones beside him and providing the last flickering light amid the darkness. All was silent as the five Spiders gazed at a single point amid the half-light. "I know you know I'm here," a voice called out from an unseen place. "But, that will not save you."

Ellarass drew his curved blades, letting them glisten in the fire light, as he stepped forward. The Spiders moved unnaturally, grasping at the rippling air, but to no avail, he had no intent of letting them touch him. Striking fast, Ellarass severed one arm at the wrist, and another just below the shoulder. Continuing the motion, he spun his blades, slipping beneath the other outstretched arms and carving deep rents in their leather coated flesh. Coming up again behind them, he severed first one head, then a second and a third. The last two Spiders shrieked in rage, one casting a furry animal at him from beneath its cloak, the other turning to flee. Ellarass struck the creature from the air, and shot forward, passing between the two of them and burying the hooked end of each sickle in a different skull.

The Spiders went limp and hung there for a moment, as Sam watched from the wall against which he leaned side by side with the Lady in Green, the trademark hems of her robes now stained with crimson still pumping out of her body. Sam's phantom savior wrenched his weapons free and disappeared seamlessly back into the darkness, like water into water.