Chasing Dragons
by MarshalofMontival

Summary

What if the Rebellion began differently? What if Rickard Stark decided to not go to King's Landing alone?

Notes

Hello all!

This is a story I have been posting on AlternateHistory.com for the past several months. I should be posting a chapter every day or three until we're caught up, and after that we should settle into a more usual updating rhythm. The original inspiration for this story is the fic Summer Crowns by DubiousScrivener, with which it shares the same general premise; the POD from Summer Crowns takes place in Chapter 10.

Without further ado, I present Chasing Dragons.

- Inspired by Summer Crowns by DubiousScrivener
The great hall of Riverrun was, perforce, the largest single room in the castle. At full capacity almost four hundred people could join the Lord of Riverrun at wine and meat. Hoster Tully had hoped that his current crowd of guests would do exactly that, for they had been assembled for a happy occasion, the joint wedding of Hoster’s daughter Catelyn to Brandon Stark, eldest son and heir of Lord Rickard of Winterfell, and Lord Rickard’s daughter Lyanna to Robert Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End. From all across northern and eastern Westeros the guests had come, fully a third of the peerage of the realm with their retinues, come to witness the socio-political event of the decade; overshadowed in scope by the great tournament at Harrenhal perhaps, but vastly more significant, as three kingdoms were bonded together by marriage and a fourth joined them in fellowship.

But three men had been consumed by madness and so all of the carefully laid plans had been brought crashing down. Instead of hosting a nuptial banquet, Hoster found himself chairing the next best thing to a Great Council.

Whether or not it would become a council of war was the topic currently being discussed.

“Our course is clear!” proclaimed Jon Umber, his beard bristling. “We must raise our banners and fight! Today!”

“You would raise your sword against your king?” Lord Darry shouted back, his eyes popping. “Have you no honor?!”

The Greatjon spat on the floor. “That, for Mad Aerys!” he roared in Darry’s face. “And for you as well, if you are too craven to fight by our side against tyranny!”

Lord Corbray took advantage of the hubbub that ensued as Darry was physically restrained from attacking the Northman to interject. “Our northern cousins say truly that we cannot let so gross an insult pass unanswered,” he said soothingly. “But neither must we forget our duty to our king. The fault for this affair lies not with him but with his son. Let us send again to King’s Landing, beseeching the king’s justice . . .” he was drowned out by a chorus of boos, over which thundered the stentorian voice of Robert Baratheon.

“We have sent to King’s Landing for justice!” the young stormlord bellowed, pointing to the high table. “And in answer of our plea, he summons my good-father to account for his actions like some common felon! Are we men or slaves, to be treated so?!”

Hoster turned his attention from the outcry among the assembled lords to cast his glance over the other two occupants of the high table. Jon Arryn was leaning forward in his chair, his elbows braced against the table as he surveyed the hall with pensive eyes over his steepled fingers. Rickard Stark was reading and rereading the missive that had come from King’s Landing, delivered by raven that very morning, his stern face set like flint.

Many men found the Warden of the North a hard man to read, but Hoster Tully knew him of old; Rickard’s angers ran cold instead of hot. The fact that he had not said anything since reading the missive aloud to the assembly betokened ill.

Hoster turned his attention back to the floor of the hall where Lord Mooton was holding forth. “We
know we are justified in our wroth, my lords, but many others will not see it so,” he said, gesturing grandly at the walls. “What of the lords of the Crownlands, who hold seisin of the king? What of the Martells, whose nephew is second in line for the Throne? What of Lord Lannister, who longs for royal favor once more? What of Mace Tyrell, who knows little of our northern cousins and cares less? What of the armies and fleets these men can muster? If we declare against the king, will not they . . . “ He was cut off by a sudden crack that made the whole hall flinch and snap their eyes toward the high table, where Rickard Stark had brought his open palm down on the tables surface.

“Have. Done,” the Stark said, his voice as absolute as a dungeon door slamming closed. “I am weary unto death of these arguments. Now I will speak, and you will listen.” Mooton showed tremendous poise, Hoster thought, by yielding the floor to Rickard with a graceful bow instead of simply collapsing into his seat. Rickard stood, ominous in his dark leather doublet and black fur-lined cape, the missive still clutched in his hand.

“Two hundred years ago and more,” he said somberly, “my ancestor Torrhen knelt before Aegon the Conqueror and surrendered his crown. When he did, he placed his hands between the Conqueror’s and swore a mighty oath, an oath that has been remembered in my line ever since. ‘To Aegon of House Targaryen, and his heirs after him, I pledge the faith of Winterfell and the North. Hearth and heart and harvest we yield up to you, our king. Our swords and spears and arrows are yours to command. Grant mercy to our weak, help to our helpless, and justice to all, and we shall never fail you. We swear it by earth and water, by bronze and iron, by ice and fire.’ And when Torrhen had sworn, Aegon too swore an oath, binding him and his heirs after him, that he would not forget our oath, nor fail to reward what was given; fealty with love, valor with honor, oath-breaking with vengeance. Any who did harm to us did harm to him, and at their peril. This he swore by the blood of his House and the fire of their dragons, that the first might be spilled and the second extinguished if he failed in his oath.” There were nods around the room; every man present was intimately familiar with what an oath of fealty entailed. “Two hundred years and more,” Rickard went on, “we have kept our oath. We gave our tax and our counsel in peace and our swords and our lives in war. We have kept faith with the heirs of the Conqueror, even in the deepest winter.”

Rickard’s voice roughened, became laced with anger. “And how has our loyalty been rewarded?” he asked rhetorically. “Our sworn men have been ambushed and murdered. My daughter has been abducted, on the very eve of her wedding day. My son languishes in a black cell, falsely accused of treason.” He paused for a shuddering breath; Hoster had learned rhetoric from some of the best, but he could detect no hint of falsehood in the Northman’s apparent emotions. “I will not permit myself to think of the torments that even now they may be suffering.”

Rickard’s anger was in his eyes now, hard as stones. “I wrote to the King, telling him of the injury inflicted on my house and humbly requesting that I be granted justice, as the Conqueror had sworn. And in answer to my plea,” his voice rose to an ursine roar as he brandished the missive, “I am summoned to King’s Landing to answer the charge of treason!”

The whole hall held its breath as Rickard lowered his hand. “Two hundred years and more of fealty and leal service,” he rumbled, “answered with murder, kidnapping, and base calumny. It cannot be borne.” His eyes swept the hall. “Aerys Targaryen has summoned me to King’s Landing,” he said, his voice terribly calm, “And to King’s Landing I will go. But I do not go to answer this false charge of treason. I go to King’s Landing to claim the justice that I am owed, and if it is refused me, I will take it.”

Silence stretched for an unbearably long moment after Rickard’s speech until Jon Arryn stood up. “All that my lord Stark says is true,” he said firmly. “Men who have given leal service cannot stand by when their fealty is rewarded by gross injury and deadly insult.” His eyes, old and
wreathed in wrinkles but still as keen as those of the falcon on his sigil, swept the hall. “We have all of us given leal service to House Targaryen since the Conqueror was crowned. But the dragons of House Targaryen are dead, and what remains of them are mere serpents, degenerate scions of a failing line, who have forgotten not just their honor but their reason. You all know well the tales of the madness of Aerys, and you know just as well the madness that Rhaegar has succumbed to.” He paused, eyes still sweeping the assembled lords. “A king who wrongs his people so is no king,” he said softly. “By all the gods, my lords, how long shall we suffer these madmen to tear at us? I for one shall not suffer it for even another minute.” He turned to Rickard. “I will ride with you to King’s Landing,” he proclaimed, “and we shall have an answer from Aerys the Mad for this insult.”

Robert Baratheon stood. “I’m coming also,” he said flatly. “And after we have settled with Aerys, I will find my Lyanna, wherever that bastard Rhaegar has hidden her. And if the kidnapper objects,” he drew his sword and raised it high, his eyes blazing fury, “then may the Gods have mercy on him, for I will not!”

Hoster stood as well, the eyes of his vassal lords hot upon him. “It is not meet that such tyranny go unanswered,” he snarled, finally allowing himself to feel the fury that he had been biting back for the past two sennights. “I will see justice done for this banditry, if I have to twist Aerys’s arms to breaking to get it from him.”

Jon Umber barked a single syllable of thunderous laughter as he stood forth. “Leave some for the rest of us, my lords,” he said in mock-chiding tones, his beady eyes twinkling. “Your quarrel with the dragons is ours as well.” The vastly proportioned northman drew his sword and held it out in salute. “Justice and vengeance!” he roared.

Every lord in the hall rose to their feet, and the drawing of their swords in the late afternoon sunlight slanting through the windows was like sudden flame. “Justice and vengeance!” they chorused. “Justice and vengeance! JUSTICE AND VENGEANCE!”
The first month and a half of the rebellion of the Lords Declarant, or Robert’s Rebellion, as it is more colloquially known, bore a greater resemblance to a royal progress than a military campaign. After marching west along the River Road, collecting the levies of the central Riverlands, the rebels linked up with the first wave of levies from the northern and eastern Riverlands and the southwestern Vale. This gave the rebels an army of some twenty-five thousand men, of which almost ten thousand were Riverlanders, eight thousand were Valemen, and the remainder a more or less even split between Northmen and Stormlanders. Further reinforcements were already on the march from the North and the remainder of the Vale, but it would take them sennights or months to arrive at Darry, and while Hoster Tully advocated waiting until the full power of the rebels was united before pressing onwards, he was overruled by Robert Baratheon and Rickard Stark, who insisted that the success of their rebellion depended on speed.

In this they were almost certainly right, as even at their full united strength the rebels would have been greatly outnumbered by the likely royalist forces. Mace Tyrell, for one, could muster almost as many men as the whole rebellion put together simply by calling out the arrière-ban of the Reach, and while the Lord of Highgarden bore no especial love for the Crown, neither was he any particular friend of the rebels. More immediately, the Crownlands could field between ten and fifteen thousand men, and when Aerys ordered Lord Commander Gerold Hightower to raise an army to crush the rebels, Hightower was able to raise eight thousand men within two weeks, with more on the way.

By the time the rebels reached Brindlewood, and the interior Crownlands, Hightower’s army numbered eleven thousand men, primarily Crownland lords and their levies along with a company of two thousand men raised from King’s Landing, and Hightower felt confident enough to give battle. He was greatly assisted in this by the ground on which he chose to fight.

The interior Crownlands had been densely populated and heavily farmed for centuries. As a result, each family’s particular plot of farmland was surrounded by well-developed hedgerows, which over the generations had developed into low walls of earth surmounted and overgrown by brambles, vines, and shrubs and trees of a myriad of types, ranging from boxwood to hawthorn to beech to laurel to yew. In between these fields ran twisting lanes of such antiquity that they had sunk into the ground between the hedgerows, so that the berms these hedgerows formed could rise breast or shoulder-high on a tall man.

It was here that Gerold Hightower had chosen to make his stand, and Jon Arryn cursed him daily for it.

Hightower had divided his army into companies of three hundred men apiece, ordering them to choose a particular field, fortify it as best they might, and hold it to the last man. As a result, the rebels were forced to fight what amounted to a series of sieges, cutting off and reducing the fields one by one as they ground forward. In two sennights they had pushed forward only a single mile, in fighting that the veterans among claimed never to have seen equaled for brutality. When forcing one’s way through the defended hedgerows and into the fields, the weapon of choice was not the sword but the dagger, wielded overarm in a reverse grip and plunged downwards into a grappled
enemy until he stopped moving.

The savage close-quarters fighting that storming a hedgerow entailed was putting particular strain on the knights and lords, whose heavier armor allowed them to take risks that killed their footmen in scores. One could argue that it was good for the morale of the army as a whole to see their leaders take such risks, but the knights were being ground down like grist in a mill. Lord Darry and Nestor Royce had both been killed, as had no less than four of Walder Frey’s sons. But the most devastating loss yet had been Lord Rickard Stark. The Old Wolf had led an assault on a field that had reportedly been defended by Hightower himself, and had been cut off and captured in the confusion when the assault was repelled. The Northmen had fought like men possessed ever since, but none more so than Ned, who made a point of leading every assault he could in the plate armor that Jon had commissioned for him for his eighteenth nameday. The rest of the army, Jon had heard, spoke in whispers of the Iron Wolf and his men, who reportedly tore down their enemies with no other weapon than their hands and teeth, and refused to take prisoners.

Jon knew the first rumor for a lie, but he knew that the second rumor was more or less true, and not just of the Northmen. The whole army was growing ever more brutal as the fighting wore on and fewer and fewer prisoners were being taken by the day. Just this morning Jon had watched as a knight in the livery of the Blounts was reduced to a sack of broken bones and pulped meat by a squad of maul-wielding footmen, despite the Blount’s cries of ransom. He knew of one incident among the Riverlanders where an assault had been preceded by a dozen prisoners being decapitated and their severed heads thrown into the hedgerows ahead of the storming party. Robert, Jon had heard, had given orders that only lords were to be taken prisoner; all others were to be killed out of hand. Jon had yet to do anything so drastic himself, but he was not immune from the growing madness either; two days ago he had butchered a fallen enemy into gory ruin, his sword continuing to rise and fall long after the man expired. It had taken three large men working in concert to drag him off of the man.

Damn you, Hightower, Jon thought wearily as a galloper came into sight bearing new orders. Couldn’t you have made this a decent fight, instead of this butchery?
After three and a half sennights of almost continuous combat the decisive breakthrough that the rebels had sought came when Gerold Hightower and his principal subordinates were caught up in an assault near the hamlet of Bluestone; Hightower himself was killed by Robert Baratheon in a ferocious contest, while his subordinates were either killed or captured. The sudden leadership vacuum lead to the disintegration of the Royal Army of the Crownlands.

However, although the rebels had finally defeated the main royalist army facing them, Hightower had delayed them sufficiently for the royalist forces to fully mobilize. The same day that the rebels broke out of the hedgerow country, forty thousand Reachmen under Mace Tyrell marched into the Stormlands, brushing aside a small force under Lord Dondarrion at Summerhall. This force later divided, with most of the thirty thousand foot under Lord Randyll Tarly marching on Storm’s End to besiege it while the rest of the foot and all of the ten thousand cavalry marched north up the Kingsroad under Mace Tyrell to relieve King’s Landing.

Tarly implemented the siege of Storm’s End with his usual efficiency, imposing a blockade by land and sea with both his own force and the Redwyne fleet that left the garrison of Storm’s End completely isolated. Tyrell, on the other hand, was sluggish in moving his force up the Kingsroad and was made even more so by the fact that the Stormland countryside had been roused against the Reachmen. The raids mounted on Tyrell’s column by the minor lords and landed knights of the central and northern Stormlands, along with their retainers and fighting-tails, rarely amounted to more than pinpricks, but the sheer number of them served to delay Tyrell’s advance on King’s Landing by at least two sennights.

Meanwhile, in the Crownlands, the rebels had received reinforcements from the Vale and the North, bringing their strength to almost forty thousand men. Emboldened by their success and their reinforcements, the rebels encircled King’s Landing and prepared to lay siege . . .

- Swords Against a Throne: Being a History of the Rebellion of the Lords Declarant by Maester Padramore, published 785 AC

Eddard Stark had yet to set foot in King’s Landing and he hated it already.

He had heard that near five hundred thousand people lived in the city, which he could easily believe from the size of the place, and judging by the smell, none of them ever washed. The aroma of excrement, smoke, fish, and sweat, all overlaid by sea-salt, was overpowering even at four hundred paces. Furthermore, the place just looked ugly. Winterfell was a fortress, not a palace, but it had a rough, functional beauty. The Eyrie looked like something out of a nursemaid’s tale, a splendor of marble amid the clouds. King’s Landing, by contrast, squatted on the north bank of the Blackwater like a toad, a heaving mass of densely-packed buildings broken by only three prominences and the structures atop them. The Hill of Rhaenys, topped by the half-collapsed ruins of the Dragonpit, rose from the northern quarter of the city like a boil. Visenya’s Hill, in the southern quarter, was topped by the Great Sept of Baelor, with its marble dome and seven crystal towers shining over the city like a mocking glimpse of what the city could be like if it were properly taken in hand. And, highest of them all, Aegon’s High Hill, in the eastern corner of the city, with the Red Keep and Maegor’s Holdfast perched atop it like a sleeping dragon.

Eddard clamped down on the anger that built in his veins at the sight of the Targaryen’s redoubt.
Not yet, he told himself, but soon, soon. Hold on, Brandon, Father; I am coming.

The Gate of the Gods creaked open and a party of horsemen trotted through it under a flag of parley. Their apparent leader was a man with flaming red hair and beard and wearing a chain of golden hands over his breastplate. On his left was an elderly man with a long gray beard wearing a maester’s chain, while on his right was a man that Eddard recognized from Harrenhall as Prince Lewyn Martell. The parley flag was held by a man Eddard didn’t know whose tabard displayed a crossed mace and dagger on green and white.

As the royalist party drew rein before the rebels, the man wearing the chain of hands nodded curtly. “I trust you’ll forgive me for not extending my hand, gentlemen,” he said curtly. “I don’t make a habit of extending courtesies to traitors.”

“Bold words from a man who has committed treason himself,” Robert spat. “Or do you deny your allegiance to me, Jon Connington?”

Connington eyed Robert balefully. “As long as you stand against your rightful king, yes,” he said flatly, before turning to Jon Arryn. “I trust you have terms to deliver. Get on with it.”

Jon drew himself up. “Our terms are these,” he said. “Aerys must abdicate the throne on grounds of his evident unfitness to rule. Rhaegar Targaryen must surrender himself and stand trial for the kidnap of Lyanna Stark and the murder of Lord Stark’s household men. All of our men taken prisoner must be returned to us with their armor and weapons, especially Lord Rickard Stark and Brandon Stark.”

“How have you not heard?” Connington interrupted. “The traitor Lord Stark is dead these two sennights.”

Eddard felt the abyss open beneath him. Father. Dead. No. It was only when Robert grabbed his arm and shouted sense back into him that Eddard realized that he had spurred his horse towards the man who had told him of his father’s death and half-drawn his sword. He rammed the sword back into its scabbard and forced himself back to calm with a long, shuddering breath. “How did my father die?” he asked when he had mastered himself.

“He asked for a trial by combat,” Prince Lewyn answered, his face sympathetic. “Aerys agreed, and your father lost. He was very brave.” Lewyn paused, then continued. “Brandon still lives, but he is . . . unwell.”

Connington spat aside. “As he should be,” he said coldly, turning back to Jon Arryn. “In place of your terms, which we reject entirely, these are the terms that His Grace King Aerys offers. You four are to submit yourselves to the King’s justice along with your principal lieutenants among those lords who follow you. The other lords and knights in your army shall receive mercy of the king on condition that they immediately go into exile overseas for the duration of their lives. The common soldiers of your army may return to their homes unmolested, provided that they swear allegiance to King Aerys and pledge to never again take up arms against him or his heirs on pain of death. What say you?”

“Horseshit,” Hoster Tully replied instantly. “We are owed justice by the King for his son’s crimes. If he will not give it to us, then we shall take it.”

“My lords,” the man wearing the maester’s chain said tremulously, “has not enough blood been shed already? The four of you have it in your hands to end this strife now, today, and spare thousands of lives, if not tens of thousands. Why should you not end this madness now, rather than two months from now, when the army that is even now marching up the Kingsroad has destroyed
“In this world, only winter is certain,” Eddard replied, his voice as cold as a winter gale. “We may lose, yes, but we will fight regardless. It is all that free men can do.” He turned to Connington, allowing some of the hatred in his bones to show in his eyes. “Tell Aerys the Mad that his life is mine; I claim it by right of my father’s blood.” He turned his horse around and spurred it back to the siege lines, his thoughts a maelstrom of grief and rage.
The siege of King’s Landing lasted all of three sennights before it came to an abrupt end. For unlooked-for Tywin Lannister had called the banners of the West and marched down the Gold Road to King’s Landing with twenty thousand men. As he marched, Tywin kept his army in excellent order, keeping looting to a minimum both by ferocious discipline and by spending gold like water to buy provisions. Tywin had declared for neither the throne nor the rebels, but the rebels chose to err on the side of caution when dealing with the formidable Lord of Casterly Rock and lifted the siege of King’s Landing to fall back on Hayford Castle. In doing so, they extricated themselves from a potential three-sided trap, with Lannister advancing from the east, Mace Tyrell marching up from the south, and the garrison of King’s Landing on either their flank or rear.

The garrison of King’s Landing, naturally, considered Lannister’s arrival to be evidence of divine favor, and opened the gates to his army in celebration . . .

- Swords Against a Throne: Being a History of the Rebellion of the Lords Declarant by Maester Padramore, published 785 AC

Tywin Lannister had not ridden through the gates of King’s Landing to acclamation in years; so long that he had almost forgotten how it felt. To have crowds of thousands line the street as you passed, cheering and calling down the benedictions of the gods, was a heady brew indeed, but Tywin clamped down on himself with an iron fist. Focus, man. Remember why you are here.

His army filed through the gate in strict order; each company in column of mess groups with their centenar at their head and every man marching in step. He had commanded that his army keep strict discipline, both on the march and in camp, and exerted rigorous pressure on the officers to make it so. There had been grumblings, which had lasted up until last night, when the men were finally informed why exactly they had force-marched across the continent when it was widely known that their lord was no friend of the Targaryens.

He was met at the Great Square by Prince Lewyn Martell of the Kingsguard, gravely elegant in his white armor. He held up a hand, there was a rippling chorus of orders and a braying of trumpets, and the army stamped to a halt, perfectly still. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. This was what was possible if people simply obeyed. “Lord Tywin,” Martell said, hiding the relief he had to be feeling with impeccable poise as he bowed in the saddle, “His Grace King Aerys welcomes you to King’s Landing.”

“I’m sure he does,” Tywin replied politely before turning to the man who rode beside him. “Now, Clegane, if you please.”

For such a large man, Gregor Clegane could be surprisingly fast. Martell died without knowing what had hit him. Almost a pity to kill a man like that, Tywin mused in the moment of stunned silence as Martell’s decapitated body slid out of the saddle. Nothing personal, Martell, just a matter of business. As far as you were concerned, anyway. “The city is ours!” Clegane roared into the silence as he flourished his bloody greatsword. “Take it! And take everything in it!”

The Army of the Westerland gave voice to a howl of unthinking bloodlust, like the baying of some great hound, as it split to either side of the street and charged, swords drawn and spears leveled. Within moments the screaming was so loud that Tywin had to shout to make himself understood.
“Take your men to the Red Keep!” he shouted in Clegane’s ear. “And remember! Once you secure my son, go right on to your other objectives! And make a clean sweep of it! I don’t want any loose ends!”

“Yes, lord,” Clegane rumbled before turning to the select company that had held ranks just behind him and Tywin while the rest of the army went on the rampage. “Follow me, boys!” he roared and spurred his charger away, his company following at a trot. A foul and unsavory crew, that lot, but every purpose had its tool and every tool its purpose.

He turned to his brother Kevan. “Plant my banner there,” he said, indicating the steps leading up to the guild hall of the Alchemists. “I will place my headquarters in the guild hall. See that the men remember that I will have no burning of buildings or other such destruction. Otherwise,” he shrugged, “I care not.” Kevan bowed, his face inscrutable, and gestured to the company of knights and men-at-arms that functioned as Tywin’s bodyguard. As the guardsmen snapped to their tasks, Tywin dismounted, handed his horse off to a squire, and strode into the guild hall as the screams continued unabated. Insult my wife and make a jest of me, would you, Aerys, he thought, as two of his knights opened the doors for him. How do you like my jest?

_The Sack of King’s Landing lasted three days and nights before Lord Tywin restored order with his usual ruthlessness. By the time it was finished, the heart of the Targaryen dynasty had been torn out. King Aerys had been killed by Ser Jaime Lannister of the Kingsguard under circumstances that to this day remain mysterious, while Queen Rhaella, Princess Elia, Princess Rhaenys, and the infant Prince Aegon had been murdered by Ser Gregor Clegane and Ser Amory Lorch with a brutality that was appalling even in that brutal age. There is no documentary evidence that Clegane and Lorch acted under orders from Tywin, but it is extremely unlikely that they would have committed so heinous a crime without orders from their liege lord. At the very least it seems unlikely that men of such repute as Clegane and Lorch would be charged with securing the royal family unless they were intended to be, to borrow a modern phrase, ‘killed while resisting arrest.’_

_Regardless of responsibility, the only Targaryens who remained alive following the Sack of King’s Landing were Prince Rhaegar, who was still at large somewhere south of the Riverlands, and Prince Viserys, who had been sent to Dragonstone under the protection of Ser Barristan Selmy during the siege._

- Dragon Declining: The Last Years of the Targaryen Dynasty by Ralph Crofter, published 1873 AC
The Parley

The parley, convened at the invitation of Tywin Lannister, took place in the neutral ground between the three armies. The rebels, drawn up to the northwest of King’s Landing, sent Jon Arryn, Hoster Tully, Robert Baratheon, and Eddard Stark. Mace Tyrell served as his own representative, joined by Alester Florent and Baelor Hightower, riding up from where he had arrayed his army opposite the rebels. And out from the city came Tywin Lannister with his brothers Tygett and Kevan. Each party was accompanied by a single man-at-arms carrying a parley banner, while Tywin was followed by a small wagon that rattle and bumped along the road.

When the negotiating parties all met there was a brief moment of silence as they each weighed each other which was broken by Mace Tyrell. “Well,” he said, affecting a cheery tone, “this is a fine puzzle we find ourselves in, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Hoster said coolly, turning to the Lannisters. “I knew you liked to hold grudges, Lord Tywin, but this seems a bit much, even for you. Can we expect a new song? The Fire of King’s Landing, perhaps?”

“Potentially,” Tywin said casually. “Minstrels have such imaginations and are so eager to curry favor.” He turned his gaze to Eddard. “You’ll be pleased to know, Stark, that we found your brother alive. My own maester is tending to him even now and he is confident that your brother will recover at least some of his former strength, although he is currently too ill to be safely moved.”

Eddard nodded deeply. “House Stark thanks you,” he said formally. “But I would like to know why you, of all people, would resort to treachery to take your revenge. From what I heard of the Reynes and the Tarbecks, simple force seemed more your style.”

Tywin’s eyes hardened. “Aerys had my son,” he said simply. “He claimed that he was doing me honor by raising him to the Kingsguard, but I knew that Jaime would be a hostage against my loyalty first and a Kingsguard second.”

“Interested as this conversation is, it is not strictly germane to our purpose here,” Jon said firmly. “We here hold the fate of Westeros in our hands. Given the fact that Aerys is dead, which information we have on reliable authority,” he bowed in the saddle to Tywin, “and that Rhaegar is currently missing and anyways unfit to rule, we presently have no king. The question before us is this; what shall we do about it?”

“There is another heir,” Mace pointed out, “if there is any truth to the rumor that Aerys sent Prince Viserys to safety on Dragonstone.”

“There is,” Tywin said, “but it would be unwise of us to raise him to the kingship. As evidence . . .” he turned in his saddle and gestured to the men on the wagon, who leaped off the seat and began pulling long cloth-wrapped bundles off the bed of the wagon and carrying them before the Lannisters and unwrapping them to reveal corpses.

An older woman who had to be Queen Rhaella was displayed first, her body marred with sword slashes. Then Princess Elia, her beauty ruined by whatever had crushed her skull. Then, hardest and coldest of all, a pair of bodies wrapped in the same cloth who could only be Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon. The state of Rhaenys’s body was bad enough, cut almost to pieces, but none at
the parley could look for long at Aegon, whose head had been not just crushed, but smashed into red ruin.

Mace signed himself with the seven-pointed star with a shaking hand, mimicked by Alester, Baelor, Jon, and Hoster. Eddard clenched his jaw and brought a hand to his mouth for a long moment before he mastered himself. Robert also tightened his jaw, but less than Eddard, and was the first to break the silence. “Is this supposed to be evidence of your commitment to our cause, Lannister?” he asked in a hard voice. “Or is this just supposed to be an object lesson of the perils of crossing you?”

The Lord of Casterly Rock shrugged. “This did not happen by any order of mine,” he replied. “I had given orders that they be honorably treated, but even the best of men becomes a beast during a sack.”

Mace Tyrell looked up from the bodies and stared at Tywin. “Give me one reason,” he said slowly, “why I should not go back to my army and declare war to the knife against you and your dogs, Lannister. These were women and children, Hells take your black soul!”

“I’ll give you two reasons,” Tywin said coldly. “Firstly, if you declare war against me, I will not rest until I have made a second Castamere of Highgarden. Secondly, the Targaryens are unworthy of your swords, Tyrell. Aerys was a raving madman and Rhaegar is at the very least a kidnapper and almost certainly a rapist as well. As for Viserys,” he shrugged. “Who can say but that he will be even more insane than Aerys, in time? Better that we dispense with the Targaryens altogether, and have a dynasty that will act in a sensible fashion.”

Jon Arryn raised a finger. “I concede the logic of your position, my lord,” he said, “but it would become us and our position to offer some mercy to Viserys. We might offer him the lordship of Dragonstone for the duration of his life, and the right of tithe and tax over the Narrow Sea houses, in return for his public renunciation of his claim to the throne.” He turned to Mace Tyrell. “Allow me to give you another reason to not take the Targaryen’s part in this war, my lord,” he continued. “If you declare for the dragons, you will be declaring war on all the rest of Westeros. The West, the Riverlands, the Vale, the North, and the Stormlands will all march against you. The Iron Isles will leap at the opportunity to reave your shores again. Your only ally will be the Dornish, who hate you only slightly less than they will hate us. And bethink you as well,” Jon Arryn’s smoothly aristocratic voice hardened, “the consequences of such a war. So long as even one Targaryen lives, there can be no possibility of peace that we will be able to trust. Our only choice, if we ever wish to live in security, will be to strike and spare not, and make the Reach a burned desert from Blackwater Rush to the Redwyne Straits. Are you willing to bring such a fate upon your bannermen, when you have it in your power to end the fighting today?”

Mace glared around the circle of faces, from Tywin’s impassive glower to Hoster Tully’s unsympathetic stare. “I will pay any price to maintain the honor of my house,” he said sullenly. “I will not tell my ancestors that I turned my back on the house that raised mine to lordship.”

“Mern Gardener maintained the honor of his house when he rode against Aegon the Conqueror, to the acclaim of the Reach,” Eddard Stark interjected. “My ancestor Torrhen Stark swallowed his pride and surrendered his crown to the Conqueror, and was condemned by high and low for it, even his own sons. And here I stand, a Stark of Winterfell, lord of all the North, in my brother’s name.” Eddard leaned forward. “Where are the Gardeners today, Mace Tyrell?” he asked intently. “Do they rule in Highgarden? Or do their ashes rest on the Field of Fire where the Conqueror’s dragons burned them?”

Mace flinched, then looked down at the corpses of the Targaryen women and children for a long
moment. At last he looked up. “You will swear for Viserys’ life if he renounces his claim to the Iron Throne?” he asked Jon Arryn.

Jon bowed. “In the sight of gods and of men,” he proclaimed, “I swear that Viserys Targaryen shall live out his days in complete security if he renounces his claim and abides by the law and peace of the Realm. By the honor of my house, I swear it.” He signed himself with the seven-pointed star and kissed the small crystal that hung around his neck.

Tywin shrugged. “I am willing to be satisfied with the vengeance I have already taken,” he said diffidently. Let Baratheon and Stark do as they like with Rhaegar and I am content for Viserys to stay on Dragonstone and molder there.”

Mace exchanged a glance with Alester Florent, who shrugged eloquently, and turned back to the rebels. “I will need to take this to the lords of my army,” he said, “but under these terms I am willing to declare a truce and pull back to the vicinity of Summerhal, if you remain north of the Kingswood and do not reinforce the garrison of Storm’s End.”

Jon Arryn cocked an eyebrow. “Do you rule the Reach, or do you not?” he asked pointedly. “Our terms of truce are given; if you are willing to accept them then do so. Or should we ask someone else?”

Mace drew himself up, glaring hot-eyed at Jon Arryn. “I rule the Reach,” he said coldly, “and I accept truce on the terms you have offered me.”

Robert smiled. “Good!” he said, clapping his hands. “Now that that’s settled, you will have to excuse me for the nonce, my lords. I have unfinished business with Rhaegar to attend to.”

“As do I,” Eddard added, stroking the pommel of his arming sword.

“The last report I had was that Rhaegar was seen riding south, towards Dorne,” Mace offered, “accompanied by two Kingsguards and a woman. Your sister, I imagine, Lord Stark.”

“Why Dorne?” Robert asked, bafflement on his face. “Does he really think that he would find refuge in Dorne after abandoning his wife and children?”

“In Dorne, perhaps not,” Tywin mused. “But I imagine that Arthur Dayne would know places in the Marches where a small party could hide themselves away from the rest of the world.”

“We’ll need an army,” Robert said. “I wouldn’t put it past the Martells to declare their independence, with the dragons gone.”

Mace Tyrell shrugged. “I would have no objection to Lord Stark taking a force into the Marches,” he allowed, “but if the Dornish do rise, then it would be best if you were not in their reach, Lord Baratheon.” He looked around the circle. “I assume, given that we are setting aside the Targaryens, that Lord Baratheon is your choice for our new king?”

Hoster Tully nodded. “He has the birth, the blood, and the ability,” he said. “And I agree that to put yourself within easy reach of the Dornish is unwise, Robert. It is not in the nature of snakes to be trustworthy.”

Eddard turned to Robert. “You know I’ll find her if she can be found,” he said earnestly. “She’s my sister, Robert. If I must scour the Marches with fire and sword, I’ll find her.”

Robert held Eddard’s gaze for a moment, his hands tightening on the reins, and then he turned to Mace. “I’m coming as far as Storm’s End, with my men,” he said. “My brothers are waiting for
“Much to Lord Tarly’s disgruntlement,” Mace said lightly. “I have your word that you will not raise more men than you have here?”

“You do,” Robert said shortly, lifting his chin. “My oath on it.”

Mace shrugged. “Fair enough, then.” He turned to Eddard. “I can provide you a company of scouts who know the Marches like the backs of their hands, if you want them. I’ll also send a raven to Doran Martell telling him to keep Oberyn on a leash and not get any ideas of his own, unless he wants my knights coming over the mountains.” He smiled wryly. “Snakes may not be trustworthy, but they can be convinced to be cautious.”

Eddard bowed. “My thanks, Lord Tyrell,” he said formally. “I will not forget your assistance in this quest.”

Mace bowed solemnly.
Loss and Resolve

When Eddard cantered back through the gates of King’s Landing nine months later, he did so empty-handed and full of dread. After riding south with Mace Tyrell and Robert to terminate the siege of Storm’s End and pick up the company of guides he had been offered, he had descended on the Dornish Marches with two thousand men and searched them from Grandview to Starfall. Every gorge, ravine, draw, and gully was combed from end to end, marcher villages were turned inside out by hard-eyed riders, and the aid of the Dornish marcher lords was enlisted with the promise of revenge against the man who abandoned Elia of Dorne to a gruesome fate.

All in vain. The terrain had yielded only stony ground and elusive game, the villages had been devoid of anything resembling a Targaryen prince, a Stark lady, or a Kingsguard knight, and the Dornish lords entrusted with guarding the border passes all swore that they had not seen Rhaegar since at least the Tourney of Harrenhal. The only thing Eddard hadn’t resorted to in the search for his sister was torture, for fear of inciting reprisals from the marcher lords. In the end, Eddard had called off the search when a raven from King’s Landing reached him at Uplands. It had consisted of only eight words: *Come to King’s Landing at once. Jon Arryn.*

So Eddard had sent riders out to his men telling them that the search was off and rode back to King’s Landing at the head of the company of lordlings that had followed him south. They had ridden their horses almost to foundering, securing remounts as they could from the Reacher lords whose keeps they happened across. In one stretch between Horn Hill and Cider Hall they averaged thirty-five miles a day for twenty days, at the cost of having to replace half of their horses. Eddard suspected that he had been cheated at least twice on the price of remounts, but he hadn’t pursued the matter. Speed had been the only priority.

As they clattered through the King’s Gate in a chilling drizzle, they were met by Arryn men and hastily conducted to the Red Keep, where Jon Arryn met Eddard in a small chamber near the royal apartments in Maegor’s Holdfast.

“There is news,” Jon said gravely, his face even more lined than Eddard remembered. “Of Rhaegar and your sister.”

Eddard stiffened. “Where are they?” he asked intently, hardly daring to hope.

“Rhaegar is in Myr,” Jon said, “a guest of the Conclave of Magisters. He summons all leal men to join him.”

“And Lyanna?” Eddard pressed, hope rising in his chest.

“Was heavily pregnant when she and Rhaegar took ship from Oldtown, though Leyton Hightower swears the ship was stolen. She went into labor while they were still at sea. I’m so sorry, Ned,” Jon said, pain evident on his face, “but neither Lyanna nor her daughter survived. They were buried at sea off the coast of Dorne.”

Eddard swayed as if struck by a hammer. *Lya. Gods, no. Not her, not her too.* He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. His father was dead, his brother sorely injured by the Mad King, and now his sister was dead. All because of Rhaegar’s madness. Eddard wanted to scream his lungs out, rend Rhaegar limb from limb with his bare hands, crawl into a hole and pull the hole in on top of himself, call down a killing blizzard from the farthest North to bury the land in ice, raise
But he could do none of these things. With his father dead and Brandon still bedridden, he was Lord of Winterfell. And lordship came with responsibilities. He forced himself to look up at his foster-father, who had respectfully stood back to leave him with his grief. “Robert?” he asked woodenly.

“took it even worse than you did,” Jon replied heavily. “He hasn’t come out of his chamber in days, hardly eats. Ned, you need to talk to him; he won’t listen to me.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Eddard said, pushing himself out of the chair.

Jon looked him in the eye. “He has to marry, Ned,” he said simply. “Not now, and not for a time yet, but soon. He needs an heir, and we need allies. Dorne murmurs of vengeance against Elia’s murderers, the Reacher lords are restive, and Tywin Lannister will expect a reward for his contribution to our cause.”

“You would reward the murder of children by making their murderer the goodfather of the King of Westeros?” Eddard snapped, the blunted anger sharpening anew.

“I would make a peace that outlives Robert,” Jon Arryn replied. “For that, we need the swords of the Westerlands. And to get the Westerlands, we need Tywin Lannister.” The Lord of the Eyrie shook his head. “Just talk to him, Ned. You’re the only one he might listen to.”

Eddard could only nod as he stumbled out of the chamber and made his way to the king’s bedchamber. He didn’t bother knocking as he went in.

“Damn you, I said get out!” Robert shouted, his words slurred with more than drink. “That’s a buggering order from your buggering king!”

The king’s bedchamber was normally sumptuously appointed, but now it looked like a herd of aurochs had stampeded through. Desk, chairs, sideboard, and tables were all shattered to flinders, whether by hammerblows or simply being thrown against the walls was anyone’s guess. The royal bed was too massive to be treated so, but the linens had been torn off and shredded. The whole room stank of vomit, alcohol, and unwashed man. Robert staggered out of the shadows, as unsteady as a harborside drunkard, his clothes disheveled, his crown askew, and a wineskin in his hand. His beard, normally neatly trimmed, had turned shaggy and his hair was lank and matted.

“Didn’t you fucking hear me, you . . .” Robert stopped mid-roar, the anger draining from his blotchy face. “Ned,” he said brokenly.

“I heard,” Eddard said simply.

The two foster-brothers stood looking at each other for a long moment, and then crashed together in the embrace of men whose world has collapsed. They wound up sitting side by side on the floor against the wall, passing the wineskin back and forth unenthusiastically as the tears streamed down their faces.

“I loved her, Ned,” Robert blurted out through his sobs. “More than anyone.”

“I know, Robert,” Ned replied, tipping the wineskin up for a swallow and passing back to Robert who drained it in a long pull.

“And that bastard worm who murdered her thumbs his nose at us across the Narrow Sea,” Robert said thickly, dropping the wineskin at his feet with a disgusted expression. “The whoreson rapist
who murdered our Lyanna dares to name himself a fucking king.”

“Yes,” Eddard said, grief crystallizing into anger. “He must answer for what he has done.”

Robert studied his hands where they rested on his knees. “Jon wants me to marry the Lannister girl,” he said abruptly. “Cersei, old Tywin’s daughter. Brought it up twice before I threw him out. I need to apologize to him for that.”

“He wants to keep you on your throne,” Eddard said dully. “Lannister swords would help with that.”

“Fuck the Lannisters,” Robert rumbled. “Fuck their swords. And fuck the Iron Throne. I didn’t ask for it and I don’t want it. I’ll not sit on that fucking chair until I can impale Rhaegar fucking Targaryen’s head on its highest spike.”

He didn’t ask Eddard to bear him witness, nor did he invoke any of the gods, but Eddard knew an oath when he heard one.

“So mote it be,” he said softly.
The two foster-brothers parted ways shortly after, Robert to wash and shave and Eddard to seek out the lords who had followed his father south, first for a wedding and then to war. He found them in a wing of the keep adjacent to the godswood, probably thanks to Jon Arryn being his thorough self. When Eddard walked into the hall that had become the de facto council chamber of the northern lords, he was greeted by a wave of condolences from the assembled lords, who had all heard the news of Lyanna’s death. Even the saturnine Roose Bolton offered his hand, while the Greatjon would not allow anyone to sit until a harper had played a lament and the company drank the arval, the grave-ale, without which ancient custom held that the dead would not lie quietly in their graves. Lyanna and her daughter had no grave but a patch of ocean on the far side of a continent from Winterfell, but the gods cared not where their children lay, so long as the rites were properly observed.

After the arval was drunk and the harper dismissed with a pouch of gold, the talk turned to Eddard’s account of his meeting with Robert, and what might come of it.

“So you’ll be bound for Myr, then,” said Galbart Glover. “You’ll be needing some good sword-arms, I imagine, my lord.”

“They would certainly be helpful,” Eddard replied. “But I’m not your lord, Galbart; Brandon is.”

“Yes, about that,” said Wyman Manderly, looking into his goblet as if it held the answer to all of life’s questions.

Eddard looked around the suddenly quiet hall. Most of the lords didn’t meet his gaze, although the Greatjon and Roose Bolton returned it squarely, as did Hugo Wull and Jorah Mormont. “Whatever it is,” Eddard said finally, “spit it out or swallow it. I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Och, damn ye all for a pack o’ fidgety auld wimmen,” Hugo Wull spat disgustedly at his fellow lords before turning to Eddard. “The Lannister lied to ye, Ned,” he said simply. “When he said yer brother would regain his auld strength.”

Eddard closed his eyes. Of course. He should have suspected falsehoods from Tywin Lannister, when the man had just sacked a city through treachery. Especially since by that time Brandon had been in the Mad King’s power for the better part of three months. “How bad is he?” he asked wearily.

“He may walk again,” Wyman said slowly. “With crutches. If he is very lucky, he may be able to get away with using a cane. That mad bastard Aerys had his kneecaps broken, among other things.” Everyone in the room winced; to be injured so was to be crippled, almost certainly for life. “As for traveling any kind of distance . . .” Wyman shook his head. “Only in a wheelhouse, if that. He won’t be able to ride a horse worth the name for any length of time.”

Eddard gently pinched the bridge of his nose. Brandon had been so vibrant, so full of energy and motion and life, that the idea of him crippled was almost unthinkable. “And you think . . . what? That he should renounce his claim?” he asked, the words heavy on the air.

“He can’t rule the North from a chair, Ned, much less a sickbed,” the Greatjon said soberly. “He has to renounce his claim. How can he pass sentence without being able to swing the sword?”
“My lord,” Roose Bolton said in his soft, soft voice, “you stood in your brother’s stead when he
married the Tully girl by proxy, and swore that you would fulfill his oaths if he were to die or be
otherwise rendered incapable. Any reasonable man would agree that your brother’s injuries would
render him incapable of fulfilling his oaths.”

“Have they consummated their marriage?” Eddard asked bluntly. He didn’t wait for answers. “If
Brandon can consummate the marriage, then he can keep his oaths,” he proclaimed, rising from his
chair. “Let me be clear, my lords; I will not usurp my brother’s claim to Winterfell, or the
overlordship of the North. It is not in me to betray my blood.” With that, Eddard marched out of
the hall and strode down the hall, first to his own chambers and then to those inhabited by his
brother, where the guards admitted him without question.

Brandon was propped up against the head of his bed, his legs encased in heavy splints. His chest
was swathed in bandages, his fingertips were bandaged as well, and there was a wide scar around
his throat. But what claimed Eddard’s attention was the three-headed dragon branded onto his
brother’s forehead.

“Not a pretty sight, eh?” Brandon asked with what Eddard could tell was forced levity, a slight rasp
in his voice. “Aerys said it was so I would remember my true allegiance whenever I looked in a
mirror.”

Eddard dropped his gaze.

“Sit down, man,” Brandon said, gesturing to a chair beside his bed. “I’d offer you some wine, but
I’m afraid I drank all that I was allowed for the day by noon. The maester who’s seeing to me has
some odd ideas about the healthfulness of wine, especially in combination with milk of the poppy.”

“I’ve drunk my fill tonight, anyways,” Eddard said, extending Ice across the space between him
and his brother. “This belongs to you now.”

Brandon’s eyes lit at the sight of House Stark’s ancestral blade, which he accepted with shaking
hands. “Thank you, Ned,” he said simply, laying it across his lap. “Not that it matters much, as I’ll
never wield it.”

Brandon . . .

“Aerys and his torturers broke me, Ned,” Brandon said bluntly. “The broken ribs and the strained
joints are healing nicely, I am told, and my fingernails are growing back as we speak, but my knees
will never work properly again.” He gestured vaguely at his legs. “I won’t be able to walk, hardly,
much less ride. My faithful bannermen,” the sudden vitriol in his voice was shocking, “will not
accept me as their liegelord.” His eyes on Eddard’s face sharpened. “Especially not when I have
two healthy brothers, one of whom has made quite a name for himself already.”

Eddard shook his head. “I don’t want it,” he replied. “And even if I wanted it, I couldn’t take it.
Not with Rhaegar still alive.”

Brandon nodded. “So you and Baratheon mean it.” At Eddard’s shocked expression he snorted
lightly. “I’m crippled, brother, not deaf. I have eyes and ears beyond this room, even in my
condition.” He paused, continued. “If you are set on this, then you must know that you can never
again set foot in the North. To have a crippled Lord of Winterfell with a healthy and well-regarded
brother would mean civil war in the end, any protestations of unwillingness to the contrary.”

Eddard bowed his head. “I can make my own way,” he said, biting back the pain and grief. “If
nothing else, I can always find a place in Robert’s household.”
Brandon nodded. “Like enough,” he said, before reaching across to grip Eddard’s clasped hands. “Kill Rhaegar,” he said fiercely, his eyes blazing. “If it’s the last thing you do, Ned, kill that kidnapping bastard. Kill him, kill Viserys, and kill any children they may have. Burn the Targaryens out of the world, root and branch, if it takes your whole lifetime and your last copper. Kill them for our father and our sister.”

Eddard met his brother’s eyes. “Justice and vengeance, my lord,” he said decisively. “Justice for Lyanna, vengeance for Father. I swear it on this sword,” he reached out and touched the tip of Ice’s scabbard, “and by the honor of our House.”

“So mote it be,” Brandon intoned.
Robert had not yet formed a small council, but a makeshift government had taken shape in the meantime. Jon Arryn stood at its head, as the elder statesman of the victorious rebels, while Hoster Tully acted as his lieutenant. With the lifting of the Siege of Storm’s End, Robert’s brother Stannis had followed him back to the city and now sat on the council by right of his kinship to Robert and his status among the stormlords, who had been impressed at his cool defiance of Randyll Tarly. Mace Tyrell and Tywin Lannister also claimed seats at the council table by right of their status and their armies. The Northmen had been represented by Wyman Manderly until Eddard’s return from the Dornish Marches, at which point Eddard had become the ranking lord among the Northmen, although he had publically proclaimed that he was only acting in Brandon’s name and at his direction. Quellon Greyjoy had made his way to King’s Landing to pay his homage to the new king, but he had no place on the council; centuries of reaving had seen to that. From Dorne not even ravens had come, beyond a short warning from Doran Martell that any attempt to invade Dorne would be resisted to the death by every man, woman, and child in that strange principality.

The council should have been reasonably harmonious, considering that everyone on it was either a supporter of the new dynasty or at least reconciled to it. This was not the case, as Eddard was witnessing. Eddard knew himself to be all but deaf and blind compared to Jon Arryn’s political astuteness, but even he could feel the tension in the air.

“We have news that the royal fleet has sailed from Dragonstone to Myr and pledged sword and sail to Rhaegar,” Tywin Lannister said in his impassive voice, his doublet immaculate. “It appears that Viserys sailed with them, as did most of the strength of the Narrow Sea and Crackclaw Point. Celtigar, Bar Emmon, Brune, Sunglass, Velaryon, Crabb, Hardy . . .”

“Scraps, all of them,” Robert spat, his face still flushed but looking much better for a trim and a bath. With the crown on properly he even looked regal, if you overlooked the redness of his features. “Barely a thousand swords between the pack of them. We broke the strength of the Crownlands in the hedgerow fighting.”

“And what remains of them is going over the sea as fast as they can find ships,” Mace Tyrell said, as Eddard breathed a sigh of mild relief. At least his vow to Viserys would no longer be breaking the peace that had concluded the Rebellion. The young dragon had chosen his fate when he stepped on the ship that carried him to Essos. “And Rhaegar will not have to rely on exiles alone; Lord Merryweather has sent me word from his exile in Pentos that Rhaegar has been negotiating with sellswords.”

“Where is he getting the money for them?” Hoster Tully asked. “He had to flee Westeros with nothing more than what he carried on him.”

“Merryweather says that he is promising to pay them handsomely out of the royal treasury when he retakes King’s Landing,” Mace replied. “And he is also promising lordships for the officers, and land for those men who wish it.”

“Interesting,” Tywin mused. “Does Merryweather charge a price for this information?”

Mace shook his head. “Only that his exile be lifted and he be restored to his title and lands of Longtable,” he replied. “I think it not too great a reward for the risk he is undertaking, to inform on
Rhaegar where we cannot easily protect or rescue him.”

Hoster shrugged. “If he can give us information more valuable than gossip we can learn from any sailor from across the Narrow Sea, then he might deserve restoration,” he said. “Otherwise, if he chooses to risk his skin in the game of shadows, that’s his own affair. Although I doubt the Conclave would move against Pentos, for fear of challenging the Titan.”

“I will draft letters for the Conclave of Magisters,” Jon said, his hair much greyer than Eddard ever remembered it being. “They will not lightly defy the might of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Letters,” Eddard said flatly. “My sister’s murderer sits in Myr as the guest of the Conclave and recruits an army and you would send letters. Shall I hold Rhaegar’s arms for you while you beat him to death with one?”

“Finally some sense,” Robert said, pointing at Eddard. “Be damned to your letters, Jon; we don’t need to write, we need to act! We need to go over to Myr and drag Rhaegar out of it by his bloody silver hair!”

“How do you propose to do that without a fleet?” Stannis asked, his dour face skeptical. “We don’t have one, the Graftons have sailed to join Rhaegar and taken their fleet with them, and I would rather entrust you to a guard of Dornishmen than see you set foot on a Redwyne deck.” Stannis returned Mace Tyrell’s glare with a glower of his own; the Redwyne fleet had blockaded Storm’s End until the siege had been raised. The siege had ended before starvation set in, but Stannis, it seemed, was not the type to let go of grudges.

“Robert,” Jon said wearily, “I know you want Rhaegar’s head on a pike, but you can’t just go harrying off across the Narrow Sea for revenge’s sake. Who will be our king if you die at sea, or on some foreign field? I can tell you right now that the Reach will not quietly accept Stannis as king. At the very least, you need an heir of your body before you go overseas.” Left unspoken was the threat of a renewed civil war. Jon had to be in a cold fury about the Graftons defecting, while both Hoster and Mace looked harassed. Eddard had heard that there were men among the Riverlords and the Reachlords who were dissatisfied with the new dynasty, but none that dared act on it. Not without something to tip them over the edge.

“Which will take years,” Robert growled. “Years in which Rhaegar will turn Myr into a fortress loyal to him and raise an army to come back and take all our heads. Damn it, Jon, we don’t have years! We need to crush the dragons now, before they regain their strength and come back for their own revenge!”

“Damn it, Robert, you are not in business for yourself!” Jon snapped, his eyes suddenly blazing fury. “You are a king now; your responsibility to the realm outweighs your own desires. You cannot simply go charging over all creation simply for vengeance, not when your people need you here, alive and ruling over them.”

Robert glared at his foster-father. “I have sworn to avenge Lyanna’s blood upon the cur that raped and murdered her,” he snarled. “Would you have me break that oath?”

“If you mean to be a king, then yes,” Jon said pitilessly.

“I agree with Lord Arryn,” said Tywin Lannister. “Kings do not have the luxury of revenge.”

Robert flinched as if he had been slapped, then looked down at the table he was leaning over, his fists braced against the surface of the table. “I cannot rest while Lyanna’s murderer walks the earth,” he said finally after a terrible moment of silence. “As the gods are my witness, I will not.”
He took off his crown and tossed it to Stannis, who caught it by sheer reflex. “It’s yours,” he said, “don’t break it.”

“I beg your pardon?” Stannis asked, visibly taken aback.

“You heard me,” Robert said, turning to Jon, who was staring at him in shock. “I quit, resign, abdicate, whatever the word is, I do it. Stannis can have the throne and Lannister’s daughter with it; I’m going to Myr if I have to bloody swim there.” He turned to Eddard. “Ned, you with me?”

“From this day until my last day,” Eddard said fervently. “Justice and vengeance.”
Jon Arryn raged, Tywin Lannister fumed, and Mace Tyrell all but begged on bended knee but Robert’s mind was made up. He would go to Myr and take revenge on Rhaegar Targaryen and gods pity the poor bugger who tried to stop him. The most that Jon could get out of them was that Robert wait a few months before making his abdication official and sailing away, and that largely because Eddard had agreed with him; after all, they would need to find men to fight at their side and ships to carry them. Robert’s agreement to delay, however, did not stop him from refusing to wear a crown (“heavy blasted thing”) or sit on the Iron Throne (“hideous old thing, and damned uncomfortable”).

They got their first recruit three days later, when Stannis brought up the matter of Jaime Lannister.

“Ser Jaime can’t be charged with Aerys’s murder,” was Jon’s instant response. “It’s not practicable.”

“He broke a sacred oath,” Stannis said doggedly. “He must answer for it.”

“He broke that oath to kill a mad king,” Tywin answered, glowering at the younger Baratheon. “He acted in good faith with his vow as a knight to uphold justice.”

“Then have him take the black,” Ned interjected. “The good of his intent does not outweigh the wrong of his actions.”

Hoster Tully raised a hand. “I have an idea,” he said. “Ser Jaime must clearly be dismissed from the Kingsguard for the killing of Aerys; mad though he was, he was still his king. But instead of being sent to the Wall, let his sentence be to follow Robert overseas. He broke an oath to the Seven; let him fight at Robert’s side for seven years as penance.” The riverlord’s mouth quirked in a half-smile. “I’m sure some septon will be able to make a sermon out of it.”

Robert shrugged. “I have no objections,” he said, and the matter was concluded. Tywin was less than enthused at the thought of his heir being effectively banished for most of a decade, despite the High Septon’s endorsement of the proposition, but he was mollified by Stannis agreeing to marry his daughter Cersei. The fact that Stannis ground out his acquiescence through clenched teeth seemed to be of little import to him as he promptly sent word to Casterly Rock for Cersei to make her way to King’s Landing.

By then word had got out of Robert’s intent to pursue Rhaegar across the Narrow Sea and Robert and Eddard were swarmed with volunteers. Robert was hugely popular in the Stormlands, quite a few of the northern lords made no secret of their preferring Eddard to Brandon, and they had both made friends in the Vale during their years at the Eyrie. But the prize catch was Brynden Tully, who walked up to them one day and announced that he was going with them.

“Hoster’s been after me to marry again,” he explained, shrugging as if this explained everything. “I think I have another war left in me.”

Robert had accepted his services in a heartbeat; when it came to famous names, Brynden Tully was only a step or two below Arthur Dayne and Barristan Selmy. Robert and Eddard were only newly famous themselves, but the Blackfish had a name that could draw men from across the continent, and a reputation second only to a very few as a man of war.
With the Blackfish taking over much of the legwork of recruiting, the framework of an army began to take shape around King’s Landing. Eddard had to outright command Howland Reed to go back to Greywater Watch to join his wife for the birth of their first child, but he accepted half of Howland’s crannogmen to serve as his scouts. The Greatjon swore himself and a third of his men to the venture, naming his uncles joint castellans of Last Hearth in his absence. Jorah Mormont went home to Bear Island but his aunt Maege remained with a score of men-at-arms and shieldwomen, including her daughter Dacey. Rickard Karstark and Medger Cerwyn pled responsibilities at home, but Karstark’s brother Arnulf remained with a company of heavy horse, while Cerwyn gave Eddard twenty riders to serve as his household men. Ser Wendel Manderly, Lord Wyman’s second son, pledged his sword and ten knights, along with a company of two hundred foot. Leobald Tallhart brought a company of foot with which to seek his fortune, and Ser Mark Ryswell brought a mixed company of horse and mounted infantry. Ethan Glover, the stamp of the black cells still on his gaunt face and haunted eyes, joined as well with a dozen riders, while the mountain clans provided a company of men who would have ‘gone hunting’ in the next winter, either old men or poor ones but nonetheless doughty.

Nor were the Northmen alone in volunteering. Minor lords, knights, and second and third sons of noble houses from across the Stormlands all but swarmed northward to pledge sword and lance to Robert, often bringing up to a score of followers with them. Brynden picked over the Riverlander host, choosing the best he could find that were willing to volunteer, many of them fellow veterans of the War of the Ninepenny Kings. Ser Lyn Corbray, newly knighted after the hedgerow battles, came from the Valemen, explaining that he was unwilling to go home to a keep ruled by his brother, professing a desire to see Essos, and bringing thirty hedge knights and freeriders with him, along with a slew of other second and third sons of the nobility and chivalry of the Vale.

It was enough to make Eddard despair. With Robert and Jaime uninterested in ‘counting coppers’ and the Blackfish too busy recruiting, it fell to Eddard to manage their accounts and he quickly found it a demoralizing task. The royal treasury had been full when Robert claimed it by right of conquest, but their army was almost three thousand strong already and every man of them needed what Brynden referred to as the three B’s; bed, board, and beer. Eddard was spending gold like water simply keeping everyone fed and housed and the thousand men that Tywin Lannister had promised had yet to arrive.

Nor was that their only problem. Stannis had spoken truly when he questioned Robert’s ability to take Myr without a fleet. There were not enough ships in King’s Landing available for hire to carry even a quarter of their growing army and even if there were, none of them were warships. If Rhaegar’s fleet caught them mid-crossing, or even in the process of debarking, they would be hideously vulnerable. Against the hundred galleys and two score of carracks that the Royal Fleet could field, the company could field one carrack, Gerion Lannister’s Laughing Lion, and twenty Ironborn longships, courtesy of Quellon Greyjoy and commanded by his son Victarion and his master-at-arms Dagmer Cleftjaw. Even Robert, who cared but little for odds of any sort, was unwilling to accept the risk of interception against such odds, even if they had enough ships to take them across in the first place. Warships were already being built, but it would take months before they were ready; months in which the company would run out of money and fall apart like a rotten carcass.

Finally, a Braavosi entered the company’s camp and begged an audience with Robert. Brought before Robert, who now held court in the Small Council chamber, he introduced himself as an agent of the Iron Bank, come to take the measure of the new dynasty. Having done so, and learned of Robert’s vow to abdicate and cross the Narrow Sea to pursue Rhaegar, he invited Robert or a representative empowered to speak in his name to come to Braavos for consultations with the leading keyholders of the Iron Bank. After Robert promised to consider the invitation and dismissed the Braavosi, Eddard wasted no time in telling him that they had to at least hear what the
Braavosi had to say. The Braavosi fleet was perhaps the most powerful in the world, so puissant that even the Royal Fleet would hesitate to engage it. If they could acquire that fleet’s services, even if only once, it would solve a good third of their problems and put them in a position to solve the rest.

Robert agreed, and promptly named Eddard as his representative, for the bond of trust between them and Eddard’s knowledge of their company’s accounts, and Gerion Lannister as his second, for his knowledge of the Free Cities. The two sailed on the next tide, armed with a letter of introduction from the Iron Bank’s representative and a mandate from Robert to acquire the use of every ship they could get their hands on.

Neither Eddard nor Gerion knew that their voyage would one day be considered one of the turning points of history, and Eddard, for one, would not have cared for the first few days. He was too busy being seasick.
After an uneventful crossing, Eddard and Gerion landed in Braavos, with much different reactions. Gerion stepped onto the dock with a light spring in his step and a deep sigh, as of a man who finds himself in an old and favored haunt. Eddard, by contrast, trudged onto the dock carefully, and with a prayer of thanksgiving that he was off that never-to-be-sufficiently-damned ship. His seasickness had abated somewhat, but he had remained queasy for the whole trip. He fairly dreaded returning to King’s Landing, and the voyage that would be necessary to take the company to Braavos.

After securing rooms at a tavern convenient to Ragman’s Harbor, the pair rested for a day before renting one of the long, slender boats that poled the canals of the city and the services of an oarsman, who paddled them through the winding canals to the Iron Bank.

The Iron Bank of Braavos was a forbidding structure, a massive construction of white and grey marble that rivaled the Great Sept of Baelor for size, although to Eddard’s mind it was much more tastefully decorated with its plain white columns and lack of gaudy stained-glass windows or intricate statuary. The whole building seemed to exude not just power, but surety of power, like a man so strong that he had no need to boast of his might. When Eddard looked at the Iron Bank, two days after he and Gerion landed in Braavos, the aura of authority that seemed to radiate from the building irrationally reminded him of his father, or Tywin Lannister, as if someone had taken the air of reflexive dominance that those men had possessed and instilled it into the structure.

Squaring his shoulders almost self-consciously, Eddard led Gerion through the doors of the Iron Bank and presented their letter of introduction to the clerk at the front desk. This clerk read the letter with eyes that went from skeptical to staring in what had to be record time and bade them wait before scurrying away at such speed that the skirts of his tunic flapped behind him. A return message invited them to the manse of Bassanio Scalizzeri three days hence, to join a feast that Magister Scalizzeri was hosting for certain keyholders of the Bank. And so five days after landing in Braavos Eddard Stark and Gerion Lannister donned the finest clothes they had brought and took a boat to House Scalizzeri, where they were bowed in and announced with as much ceremony as would have taken place in the Red Keep.

The food was excellent, the wine even better, and the entertainment provided by a troupe of musicians and jugglers was superb, but Eddard couldn’t help but feel like a performing bear. Compared to the neat and spare Braavosi in their somber greys and browns, even his relatively modest doublet, white linen with the grey direwolf embroidered in silver thread under the upward-facing crescent that marked him as the second son of his house, stood out like a star in the night sky, although he paled next to Gerion’s flame-bright crimson tunic with the lion rampant of Lannister embroidered in cloth-of-gold.

The comparison wasn’t helped by the difference in body type between the two Westerosi and their Braavosi hosts. Neither Eddard nor Gerion was particularly large, by Westerosi standards, but they had spent almost all of their lives training to arms. Consequently, they were both broad-shouldered and deep-chested men, with forearms so muscular that they flowed into their hands without much in the way of indentation at the wrist. Compared to the Braavosi, who were slimly-built for the most part except for one or two of great corpulence, Eddard felt like a troll. To be sure, a few of them looked like men who had some skill at arms, but they were still lean and wiry men, as slender as the blades of their swords.
At least the lady seated next to him was intelligent and sensible enough not to press him too closely for details about Westeros in general and the North particularly. Eddard was in no mood to discuss the home he would never return to.

After the last of the food was cleared away, a servant in the livery of the Scalizzeri appeared at Eddard’s elbow. “My lord,” he said in a low voice, “the keyholders retire to the roof for digestives and wish to invite you. Your friend will be well entertained while you converse with the keyholders.” Eddard glanced over at Gerion and saw that he was deep in conversation with a stunningly beautiful woman with dark brown skin and black hair. “Lady Bellonara Otherys,” the servant said, a ghost of a smile flitting across his face, “whom men call the Black Pearl of Braavos. Your friend will be well entertained, my lord, if I am any judge.”

Eddard shrugged. They hardly had the money to spend on a courtesan, especially one who could command the price that the Black Pearl could, but what Gerion did with his own money was his business; it wasn’t as if the man was married. “Lead on,” he said to the servant, who bowed and led him to a staircase that emptied onto the roof of the manse.

Evidently, it was a custom for guests to retire to the roof after dinner, for the roof was broad and flat, topped with a linen canopy and strewn with chairs, couches, and stools. Many were already filled by men in the drab attire of keyholders, although one man, a slight fellow who seemed only a few years older than Eddard with curly black hair, a great beak of a nose, and a body that seemed to be made of sticks and rawhide was wearing swordsman’s leathers relieved only by a small badge on his left breast of a sword, the hilt up and the point down. This man immediately caught Eddard’s attention by the way he sat on his stool; not heavily or sprawling as the others were, but erect and with his legs coiled under him, ready to spring in any direction. Eddard had known men in Westeros who sat like that. They had invariably been men who earned their daily bread by killing people.

“I see that a wolf recognizes a tiger when he sees one,” Bassanio Scalizzeri said lightly. “Be at ease, Ser Eddard, you are in no danger from this man. Allow me to present Syrio Forel, First Sword of Braavos. Master Forel, I present to you Eddard Stark, who is here to represent King Robert Baratheon of Westeros.”

Eddard and Syrio exchanged slight bows as Eddard’s nerves sharpened. First Sword, Gerion had told him, was the title given to the personal champion and chief bodyguard of the Sealord. Whatever was going on here, the Sealord had an interest in it.

And for one of such youth to hold such a post said much about them. Eddard knew little of the First Sword, beyond what Gerion had told him, but he imagined that the requirements to receive the title were equivalent to those required to join the Kingsguard. Perhaps not knighthood, but certainly valor, prowess, honor, and a willingness to put yourself between your sovereign and an arrowstorm.

A trio of silent servants carrying trays presented the keyholders and Eddard with a selection of liquors as they discussed trade and ships lightly while Eddard admired the view of the city and then withdrew, bowing. Eddard noted that Syrio had taken nothing, and that the eyes of the keyholders all turned to him as soon as the servants left.

“We are told, Ser Eddard,” said a keyholder so fat he managed to fill an entire couch by himself, “that you come in search of ships.”

“As many as can be hired,” Eddard replied, tearing his eyes away from the First Sword of Braavos. “We have sore need of them.”

“To conquer Myr?” another keyholder asked. “We have no love for the slaveholding cities but it
would be an ill thing if the current balance between the daughters of Valyria were too greatly disturbed. Peace is not something to be lightly cast aside.”

“We have no quarrel with Myr,” Eddard said. “Only the kidnapper and murderer who hides behind her walls, and the men who shield him.”

“Yes, the Targaryen prince who now calls himself a king,” mused a third keyholder. “We are told that he pays court to the daughter of one who sits high in the Conclave of Magisters, and has done the city good service on the borders against Tyrosh and Lys. We believe,” he said softly, his eyes darting around the other keyholders, “that the Targaryen and Myr may soon become inseparable; in fact if not in name.”

Eddard narrowed his eyes. So Rhaegar thinks to find himself a new throne, eh? “If that is so, then so much the worse for Myr,” he said.

The eyes of the keyholders sharpened upon him, but none more so than the eyes of Syrio Forel. “And what, we wonder, shall become of the other Targaryen prince,” asked a fourth keyholder, this one a grave-faced man with a short patch of beard under his lower lip and a pair of mustachios that had to be a foot long from end to end. “The sins of the fathers are not always inherited by their sons, but their possessions and aspirations are. And boys become men, in the fullness of time.”

Eddard ignored the keyholder and met the gaze of the First Sword of Braavos. “I have sworn,” he said, trying to sound like his foster-father passing judgment, “to make an ending of House Targaryen. I have sworn on the honor of my House that I shall destroy them root and branch, so that the line of the Conqueror shall be no more. In this I am joined by His Grace King Robert, and by the other lords and knights of our company.”

The First Sword studied him for a long moment and then nodded sharply. “Well and so,” he said in a lilting voice. “He will do, masters, as will his king, if he sends such a man to treat on his behalf.”

The keyholders relaxed visibly. “Our apologies for the interrogation, Ser Eddard,” said Bassanio, sipping from his glass, “but we did not know what sort of man your king had sent, or what your true intentions were. We will provide you the use of ships to carry your company across the Narrow Sea, and loan you gold besides, if you will do us a service.”

Eddard was rocked, but strove manfully not to show it. He had not expected the Iron Bank to be so generous. “What manner of service, my lords?” he asked, swirling the drink in his glass.

“What know you of our city’s relationship to Pentos?” asked Bassanio.

Eddard frowned. “I know that Pentos stands as a vassal to Braavos,” he said carefully, “and that it is forbidden from maintaining either an army or a fleet worth the name.”

“Accurate enough,” said the fat keyholder. “In addition to which, we have forbidden Pentos from participating in the slave trade or from keeping slaves. You must understand, Ser Eddard,” the fat keyholder’s face was flushed, “that slavery is anathema to us. The First Law of Braavos is that no man, woman, or child shall be a slave, a bondsman, or a thrall. We who are children of old Valyria’s escaped slaves can never be reconciled to the practice of slavery.”

“No more can we,” Eddard replied. “Both the Old Gods and the Seven proclaim slavery an abomination.”

The keyholders murmured approbation, a few of them tapping their feet against the roof.

“Then you will understand our disgust at learning that the slave trade is alive and well in Pentos
“When the old First Sword died,” Syrio Forel interjected, “the Sealord announced that he would interview candidates to be the next First Sword. He met with them in a parlor, holding on his lap a cat. In the course of their conversation, the Sealord would comment on this cat, and invite comment from the men he interviewed. All agreed that it was a most wondrous cat, of unusual beauty and obviously of great puissance, clearly a mighty specimen from some exotic land. At last, the Sealord interviewed me. And when he asked me what I thought of the cat I said that he was a most excellent cat, of the sort that I saw every day in the alleys of our city. Other men were stronger, faster, of greater renown, but I was named First Sword of Braavos, because I alone saw the cat for what he truly was and spoke truly to the Sealord. I have seen Pentos, Ser Eddard,” Syrio continued, his lilting voice hardening, “and I tell you truly that I saw slaves on every street and in every great house. The Pentoshi magisters may call them free bond servants, as they do, but when a servant’s bed and board and clothing is worth more than their hire, and they have no right to petition for higher wages or seek work elsewhere, then that servant is a slave and nothing else.”

“Normally, we would attend to this ourselves,” said Bassanio, “but much of our strength is committed elsewhere. War is not only found in Westeros.”

“To hold Norvos and Qohor at bay, and occasionally to assist them in defending their territories along the upper Rhoyn from Volantis, requires just over a third of our strength in any given year,” Syrio supplied. “Of the rest, much of it is deployed aboard our ships, which range from the western shore of Westeros to Yi-ti. Some few ships even sail to Asshai-by-the-Shadow, though never more than two or three a year attempt that voyaging. The remainder is garrisoned at the Arsenal or the Titan, and guards the city. To send a force to Pentos to enforce the laws against slavery would leave us hideously vulnerable.”

“In addition to which,” the fat keyholder said, “to enforce our rule in Pentos with our current forces would destabilize the current balance of power among the Free Cities. We are perhaps the strongest of Valyria’s daughters, but we are not so powerful that we can lightly enter into a war with Myr or Lys or Tyrosh, any more than they can with us. To face an alliance of two of those cities, or even all three, as may occur if we move to bring Pentos utterly within the cloak of our power,” he paused to sip at his glass, “suffice to say that we would not have to make too many mistakes before we faced utter disaster.”

“However,” said the keyholder who had asked whether Robert intended to conquer Myr, “if we could get our hands on some five or six thousand Westerosi horse and foot with a desire to cross the Narrow Sea to make war, then at the very least we would be able to solve each other’s problems, and so become allies of convenience at the very least.”

Eddard sipped at his glass to conceal his thoughts. In his wildest dreams he had not expected such success. “So our part in this would be to escort your officials into Pentos, see them installed, and stifle the slave trade?” he asked.

“In broad terms, yes,” Bassanio said. “There may be some resistance from the Pentoshi, but we trust you will be able to overcome it.”

“And in return,” Eddard continued, “we would get passage across the Narrow Sea, a contract to see your men emplaced in Pentos, and a loan to cover our further expenses in the hunt for Rhaegar?”

“Passage for men and horses, naturally,” replied a keyholder who had remained previously remained silent. “For the contract we are willing to pay each footman four of your copper stars per
day, each horseman one silver stag and two copper stars likewise, each knight one silver moon and 
three silver stags ditto, and each senior officer two gold dragons and one silver moon. Days spent 
in combat to be paid at double the daily rate per man, with losses of horses or equipment in combat 
to be made good at our expense. Payment to be disbursed monthly, reckoned on the lunar calendar 
starting at the full moon. The contract to run for one year from the date of your company’s arrival 
in Essos, with the option to renew it at the agreement of both parties. The terms of a loan can be 
discussed after your contract is completed.”

Eddard had to clench his jaw to keep it from dropping. Part of him rebelled at selling his sword, as 
if he were some broken man without name, house, or lord, but it would solve most of the 
company’s problems almost at a stroke. Their coffers would be replenished, they would gain a 
powerful patron on this side of the Narrow Sea, and most importantly, they would be across. Once 
the company was in Essos, half the battle would already be fought, and the greater half of 
Rhaegar’s advantage over them would be nullified. Eddard had been fretting himself ill over the 
problem of maintaining the company and finding them transport; if someone had offered to arrange 
for the company to fly across the Narrow Sea, he would have been willing to hear them out.

Of course, that didn’t mean he had to accept the proffered solution without having a say in the 
terms. Five thousand swords gave you rights. “Payment due one month in advance,” he said firmly. 
“If we are to turn sellsword, then it would behoove us to never fight for free.” A round of chuckles 
was accompanied by a graceful gesture from the keyholder who had outlined the terms. “The 
length of contract to run six months from date of signing or until Pentos is conquered and secured, 
after which renewal shall be at the agreement of both parties. Otherwise, in the name of His Grace, 
I accept your terms as they have been given me.”

Bassanio clapped his hands. “Done and done!” he cried. “Gentlemen, a toast!” Glasses were raised 
into the air. “To the contract we make here today, and to our friends of Westeros!”
The Parting of Brothers

Gerion hadn’t liked it, but Robert had made their respective roles clear before they boarded ship. Gerion was there to act as guide and advisor, nothing more. Authority to speak in Robert’s name and sign with his hand had been vested in Eddard. And so the contract was signed and sealed and three sennights later Eddard and Gerion sailed back to Westeros at the head of a veritable flotilla of galleys and caravels, enough to carry six thousand men and horses across the Narrow Sea.

When they arrived in King’s Landing, they found that the company had grown to more than six and a half thousand men, thanks to late arrivals from the Reach, the arrival of the thousand Westermen who would be following Jaime Lannister over the Narrow Sea under the command of his uncle Tygett, and the advent of Victarion Greyjoy and nine hundred Ironborn reavers. Fortunately the Ironborn could transport themselves in their longships, a wave of newly-constructed ships had come off the slipways of King’s Landing’s shipyards and Brandon had persuaded Lord Manderly to place the better part of his fleet, ten carracks, at the company’s service, in addition to other ships that frequented White Harbor. The ships would be crowded, but everyone could be carried across in one voyage.

If the company’s encampment was all a-bustle with preparations to depart, with Robert striding about in fine fettle chaffing with the soldiery and roaring at longshore gang bosses in turn, the Red Keep was a ferment of frantic activity. In addition to the aftermath of Stannis’ wedding to Cersei Lannister, which had taken place while Eddard was in Braavos, and the preparations for Robert’s formal abdication and Stannis’ coronation, which seemed to require a small army of maesters to invent the correct protocol, Jon Arryn and Mace Tyrell were politicking frantically. Eddard was absorbed in preparing the company to sail, but he overheard that Denys Arryn had been confirmed as Jon’s heir and betrothed to Delena Florent, that Leyton Hightower’s second son Garth and Arywn Oakheart’s eldest son Arahad were to come to King’s Landing as squires, that Mathis Rowan’s newborn son had been betrothed to Mace Tyrell’s infant daughter, and that Randyll Tarly had been named Captain of the Marches with a brief to command the forces of the marcher lords in the event of war with Dorne, which looked more likely with every day that passed without communication from Sunspear.

“The trouble is that we just don’t know what the Dornish will do,” Jon Arryn said one day over luncheon, looking bone-weary. “The Reachlords may be pacified for now with these betrothals and squirings, but Dorne may as well be a closed book to us. Doran Martell has yet to reply to any of our letters asking for a council between us and he, Oberyn Martell is riding from house to house across the Principality, and their border lords are not letting even trade caravans pass, much less emissaries.” He had shaken his head. “If I fear anything, I fear what Oberyn Martell may do. I doubt that he will fight for the man who abandoned his sister, but who can say what is in the Red Viper’s mind? Dornishmen are all mad and he is the maddest of them all.”

At last all was prepared, Robert abdicated and Stannis was crowned in a ceremony that struck Eddard as ostentatiously magnificent, probably thanks to Tywin Lannister’s purse, the ships were loaded save for the men, and the company was ready to sail on the morning tide, and Eddard found himself in the company of his brother in the godsvood of the Red Keep, standing before the heart tree. Brandon was but newly risen from his sickbed, with his ribs and joints healed and his knees, according to the maesters, as mended as they were likely to be. Brandon was able to walk somewhat, with his legs braced and bound straight and the use of crutches, but his former grace and strength had been replaced with a hesitant jerkiness, like a newborn foal that hadn’t quite

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learned the use of its legs. Eddard hadn’t missed the looks that those Northmen who would be staying behind had shot at him over the course of the feast, especially when he hadn’t joined in the dancing.

“Take care of Benjen for me?” he eventually said, breaking the companionable silence they had fallen into. “Make sure he doesn’t make too great a fool of himself?”

“Aye, I will,” Brandon said, shifting his crutches. “Until he goes to the Wall.” At Eddard’s glance he shrugged. “He wrote me, asking leave to take the black after I returned. I’m not inclined to refuse him; best to forestall any foolishness.” He grinned lopsidedly. “He’ll stay at Winterfell until my fish-wife gives me a son and a spare, though. Can’t have the line die out; there must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

Eddard nodded. Every scion of their house absorbed that with their mother’s milk. “How are you and Catelyn suiting each other?” he asked. His brother and good-sister had attended the coronation feast together, and seemed content with each other.

“Aerys’s torturers broke my knees, Ned, not my cock,” Brandon said with a reminiscent smile. “Took a bit of fumbling, but we suit each other just fine.” He chuckled at Eddard’s reddening ears. “Aren’t you a bit old to be blushing like a maiden, Ned? I know you and Ashara Dayne passed the time together, and I surely hope you had at least a few conquests in the Vale.”

Eddard glanced at his brother. “I did,” he said shortly, his tone not inviting further comment. “But a gentleman does not boast of such, out of consideration for the ladies. In any case,” he said over Brandon’s bark of “HA!” “Robert was the one who cut a swathe through the women of the Eyrie and the Gates of the Moon. I had to confine myself to what he passed over, which wasn’t much.”

Eddard loved Robert as another brother, but there were things even brothers shouldn’t share. Secrets, horses, and wine, certainly, but not women.

Brandon turned a glance to Eddard. “Do you think he would have stopped?” he asked bluntly. “I heard Lyanna’s complaints about him, Ned, don’t think I didn’t. If swearing off other women was the price of her marrying him, do you think he would have paid it?”

Eddard thought for a moment. “I believe so, yes,” he said finally. “He was infatuated with her. But,” he paused, gathering his thoughts, and then forged ahead, “Lyanna didn’t see that. She simply saw the women he had had before her, and the daughter he had in the Vale; charming little girl, Mya by name. She didn’t see that, to Robert’s mind, they didn’t matter. Once they had married, he wouldn’t have looked twice at another woman.”

Brandon nodded, then shrugged. “Fair enough. Not that it matters now, does it,” he said bitterly. “She’s dead, and all we can do is honor her memory and avenge her death.” He turned hot eyes onto Eddard. “Kill him,” he hissed, seizing Eddard’s arm. “Kill him and all his name and ilk. I will give you what aid I can, but you must swing the sword. Send Rhaegar’s heart and his balls to Winterfell in a box and I will die a happy man. For the sake of our blood, brother, kill him.”

“I swear to you, my lord,” Eddard said ardently, “there is nowhere under heaven where I will not pursue him. Not the farthest shore, not the most distant mountain, not the deepest pit of the deepest hell.”

“Good, good,” Brandon said, nodding, his hand still on Eddard’s arm. “Gods all speed your travels and strengthen your arm, brother. I’ll tell my sons of you.”

“And I mine of you,” Eddard said, returning Brandon’s grip with one of his own, “if I ever have any.”
The brothers embraced for the last time under the waning moon.
The Landing of the Sunset

After an uneventful voyage, the company landed on the southern end of the Braavosian Coastlands, at a small town called Mytila, where they met with the contingent of Braavosi justiciars who had been dispatched to investigate the servile practices of Pentos. Their head was introduced as Tregano Baholis, late of the Sealord’s household and vested with the power of command over the expedition, although he promised to defer to Robert’s judgment in military matters. The town’s chief magistrate was also present to pay his respects, which he did with almost exaggerated courtesy. Six and a half thousand troops suddenly landing on one’s doorstep at short notice would terrify any civic authority, whether they were destined for his overlord’s service or not.

After the ships had unloaded and the encampment had been established, the company had been assembled at the base of a small hill a mile from the camp. At the top stood the leadership of the company, Robert standing to the fore with a tall, heavily-built hedge knight from the Stormlands named Ser Dafyn Otley standing behind him clutching a pikestaff, the top third of which was wrapped in cloth. On either side of Robert stood his five captains; Eddard Stark, Brynden Tully, and Jaime Lannister on his right and Lyn Corbray and Victorion Greyjoy on his left, while the Braavosi delegation stood a little apart from the company officers. After Justiciar Baholis read out the proclamation declaring “a state of hostilities short of war” between Braavos and Pentos, whatever that meant, and accepting the company into the service of Braavos on behalf of the Sealord and his Council of Thirty, Robert stepped forward.

“The rules of this company are simple,” he declared in a voice that boomed over the assembly, although heralds stationed through the crowd repeated his words anyway. “Firstly, you fight, you fight well, you fight to win, you fight to the death if you have to.” There was a slightly surly muttering from the company; of course they would do so. That was their part of the bargain as men-at-arms.

“Just so we’re clear,” Robert continued. “Secondly, you will obey the lawful orders of your superior officers as you would obey your gods. You don’t obey a lawful order, you deserve whatever happens to you. Clear?” The company murmured assent. That was also part of the soldier’s bargain.

“Thirdly, the common folk of this country will not be abused in any way. We are here to give this country justice and good government, not to set ourselves up as tyrants. So treat the common folk as you would like your own families to be treated. As for the magisters and the slaveholders,” Robert shrugged, “just remember what your mothers taught you about playing with your food.” A wave of predatory chuckles swept through the company. When it got out what the company would be doing when it got to Pentos, the men’s enthusiasm had sharpened; not only would they be doing a righteous deed, but they had the opportunity to get rich out of it. Everyone knew the stories of the wealth of the Essosi magisters.

“Fourthly, regarding the division of plunder,” Robert proceeded. “Any coin you take is yours, but other valuables will be purchased at fair market value by the Iron Bank, in the person of Master Vito Nestoris here,” he gestured to a slim man in the drab brown tunic of the Iron Bank’s officials. “One-third of the purchase price is yours to spend as you like. One-third goes to the general coffers of the company, in order to help pay for all the food you bottomless pits shovel into your maws.” There was a round of laughter. “And the remaining third will go to the Sealord, as his share of the
spoils of this venture. Any man who defrauds the company to the value of one gold dragon answers to a court of officers. Clear?” The murmur of assent was muted, but it swept the company nonetheless. Plunder was one of the main draws of a soldier’s life and any interference with it was usually fiercely contested, but the disapproval was muted by the fact that the company had received their first month’s pay before sailing.

“Just a few more things, and then dismissed,” Robert said. “Firstly, we have a name; the Sunset Company. Secondly, thanks to the ladies of the Red Keep, we have a banner. You may fly the banners of your houses as you like, but the company banner takes precedence over all others, even my own. Clear?” At the chorus of assent, Robert turned and nodded to Ser Dafyn, who bowed and swung the pikestaff in ever-widening circles to unfurl the new banner of the Sunset Company, six feet by six feet of silk displaying a severed dragon’s head in red impaled on a black sword, backed by a half sunburst in yellow resting on the border between the two halves of the field, purple over green. There was a murmur of appreciation for the new banner, and some scattered applause. “We remain here all day tomorrow, and then march to Pentos the day after,” Robert announced. “Any questions? No? Then DISMISSED!” As the Sunset Company broke up and drifted to their tents, save for those appointed to sentry duty, the captains met in Robert’s tent with Justiciar Baholis and Master Nestoris.

“Our agents in Pentos inform us that they expect no resistance to be offered,” Baholis said as he accepted a cup of wine from Robert’s squire, a pimpled young man named Richard Horpe. “Indeed, they tell us that the Prince of the city plans to greet us himself, with his council, in the Great Square.”

“Let’s hope they do,” Brynden Tully said, clutching his goblet in both his battered hands. “We may have the second-largest body of fighting men on this continent here with us, but we don’t have any siege equipment. If the Pentoshi shut the gates on us, we’d look bloody silly stuck outside the walls.”

“I doubt they would do any such thing,” Lyn Corbray said lazily. “They know what happens to towns that get taken by storm.” He wagged his eyebrows at Jaime Lannister. “Especially those taken by lions, eh, Kingslayer?”

Jaime narrowed his eyes, but his rejoinder was forestalled by Robert. “Corbray,” he said warningly, “keep a civil tongue in your head or keep silent.” He glowered about the room. “And that goes for the lot of you, and your officers. While you are in this company, you are not permitted to duel for any reason; there aren’t enough of us here that we can afford to kill our own. Him that gives reason for a duel gets to duel me. Clear?” There were nods all around, if reluctantly from Lyn, Jaime, and Victarion. The right to defend one’s honor with sword in hand was taken for granted by the Westerosi aristocracy, but Robert had a point.

“In any case,” Baholis said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had descended, “we should be able to march through the northern gate of Pentos within a sennight or two.”

“Gods willing,” Robert said, draining his goblet. “In aid of which, we have work to do. I’ll have to lead the vanguard but Ned, I want you and your Northmen right behind me . . .”
To Fulfill a Contract

The company reached Pentos city two and a half sennights later and spent the first night camped outside the walls to prepare for the official entry into the city tomorrow and go over the plan one last time. When dawn broke, officers and rankers alike had been up for two hours already, making last-minute preparations and getting themselves in formation. At noon a trumpet blared, the northern gate of Pentos opened, and the company stepped off to march into the city under a bright-blue sky only sparsely interrupted by clouds.

The first detachment through the gate was Robert’s Stormlanders and Reachmen, five hundred mounted knights and men-at-arms and a thousand foot with Robert at their head riding a massive charger, his antlered helmet almost nine feet off the ground, Justiciar Baholis at his side. He was closely followed by Eddard’s Northmen, five hundred riders and a thousand foot, with Eddard leading them on his courser, resplendent in the suit of plate armor that was a gift from his foster-father. Behind them were Lyn Corbray’s Valemen, two hundred knights and mounted men-at-arms with six hundred foot augmented by Victarion Greyjoy’s nine hundred Ironborn reavers, which immediately fell out and took control of the gate house, dismissing the city watchmen with polite but firm assurances that they would take responsibility for the gate. As Jaime Lannister’s thousand Westermen, three hundred knights, squires, and men-at-arms followed by seven hundred foot, and Brynden Tully’s two hundred and fifty knights and men-at-arms and seven hundred infantry filed in through the gate, the Valemen and the Ironborn fanned out along the circuit of the walls, evicting the city watchmen from the gates and ordering them closed. A few made to object, but hard words from knights and reavers backed by hands on sword hilts and axe hafts, and in the case of one argumentative sergeant a blow from Victarion’s fist that sent him sprawling, persuaded them that discretion, in this case, outweighed valor and they went home, calling their families inside and barricading the doors.

As the Westerosi marched through the city they were met with scattered cheers and applause from the citizenry. A few, either greatly daring or else carried away by the spectacle of six and a half thousand armored men marching in close formation, threw flowers at the soldiers, but the vast majority simply stood and watched, their smiles edged with nervousness. Like townspeople the world over, the Pentoshi feared soldiers, especially foreign ones. Only the fact that they couldn’t hope to withstand either siege or assault had driven them to accept their rulers opening the gates.

When the company reached the great market square in the center of the city, specially cleared for this occasion, they filed off from column to line, with Robert’s contingent at the right of the line and Brynden’s Riverlanders at the left, the cavalry a spear-length ahead of the infantry. Facing them on the far side of the square was the Prince of Pentos, accompanied by the magisters of his council and a slew of other highly-ranking merchants. As Justiciar Baholis dismounted the Prince stepped forward, his arms spread in welcome. “Greetings, my lords,” he cried with every appearance of joviality. “Be welcome in Pentos, princess of cities!”

Tregano Baholis inclined his head. “We thank you for your welcome,” he said formally. “My Lord Baratheon, if you please.” Robert gestured curtly at a mounted herald behind him, who urged his horse forward a pace and produced a roll of parchment.

“What ye, hear ye,” he cried in the loud-but-not-quite-shouting voice of a professional announcer. “Whereas it has come to the attention of His Excellency Ferrego Antaryon, Sealord of Braavos, and the Council of Thirty, that the practice of slavery continues in the city and country of Pentos,
whereas the existence of slavery in the city and country of Pentos is in direct violation of the terms of the peace between Braavos and Pentos, and whereas His Excellency the Sealdor and the Council of Thirty have no confidence in the ability of the Prince of Pentos or the Council of Magisters to enforce the laws against slavery, a state of emergency is declared in the city and country of Pentos, this by decree of His Excellency the Sealdor in conclave with the Council of Thirty. All powers of government are hereby vested in the Honorable Justiciar Tregano Baholis, duly appointed representative of the Sealdor and the Council.”

The Prince of Pentos by now had stopped in his tracks, his staring eyes and gaping mouth making him look like someone had struck him between the eyes with a hammer, while behind him the magisters of his council and the merchants looked similarly flabbergasted. The herald plowed on. “By decree of Justiciar Baholis, the Council of Magisters and the City Watch of Pentos are dissolved. Full military and police powers are invested in Lord Robert Baratheon, Captain-General of the Sunset Company, and his officers. Gods save His Excellency the Sealdor and the Council of Thirty!”

“My Lord Baratheon, fulfill your contract, if you please,” Baholis said pleasantly, as if he had not just had announced the conquest of a nominally sovereign country.

“With pleasure, my lord,” Robert growled, turning his horse to face the company. “Company!” he roared. “Arrest the Prince of Pentos, arrest his council, arrest every slaveholder in this city! Harm no slave, woman, or child under fifteen, but take every magister and merchant in this city and bring them here for judgment! Company, move!”

Eddard spurred his horse forward, the twenty riders of his household following him by a split second, and cantered towards the Prince and his council, followed by three hundred Northern horsemen. Behind him there was a sudden torrent of motion and noise but Eddard didn’t stop; he knew his part of the plan. Forty paces away from the council and the cluster of other magisters and merchants he raised his fist in the air and roared “DIVIDE!” as he guided his horse around the left of the Pentoshi government and dignitaries, trailing riders like a tail, and circled around behind them at the canter, meeting Arnolf Karstark and his horsemen halfway around, while the Pentoshi milled around in the middle of the circle of riders, some spitting with fury, others gabbling in terror, a few outright fainting. One man, however, simply raised his chin and stared at Eddard from beneath hooded eyes, as if to say; this display boots not. I will not be intimidated by flea-ridden barbarians. Eddard met his gaze with an iron-eyed glare; Perhaps, that glare acknowledged. And yet here we are.

With the magisters and merchants penned in a ring of horsesflesh and hard-faced riders with swords and spears ready to use, Eddard trotted back to Robert, who had taken the Prince of Pentos captive by the simple expedient of riding him down, kicking him in the face with a sabatoned foot, and then dismounting and planting a foot on the prone man’s back. The fact that the Prince was still moving testified that Robert had restrained himself; such a blow with one of Robert’s pillar-like legs behind it could quite easily have caved the man’s face in as effectively as a blow from Robert’s hammer. “The council is secured,” Eddard said. “Is everyone about their tasks?”

“Like so many wheels turning,” Robert said, pointing behind him with his thumb. The only men of the company remaining in the square were a hundred of Robert’s Stormlanders and Eddard’s three hundred horse; the rest had split off in a series of columns, each guided by a Braavosi justiciar to the part of the city they had been assigned to secure and clear of slaveholders. “Corbray sent a galloper saying that he had control of the gates right before this kicked off,” Robert added, leaning forward onto the struggling Prince underneath his armored foot. “So long as none of them get to the harbor before the Blackfish’s lads get there, we may bag the lot.” Baholis, sitting his horse next to Robert, bared his teeth in a smile that was equal parts smug and carnivorous.
“I’ll take a hundred of my riders and join the other Northmen,” Eddard said, turning in the saddle and gesturing to his underofficers. “This needs to be kept under control.”

“Aye,” Robert agreed with a grin. “Can’t have the lads burn the city down, can we? Don’t think our employers would like that.”

Eddard swallowed a grimace as he led his two hundred riders away. Robert could joke, but the stories Eddard had heard of the sack of King’s Landing had been bad enough. He had no wish to see a sack in person.
The Captains

On the one hand, Victarion was enjoying himself immensely. To be sure the sack of Pentos had been pitiful, as sacks went; his men had been charged with holding the Sunrise Gate against all comers and so they had missed out on the loot and the women, neither of which had been very plentiful anyway by all accounts. That said, they had paid most of the iron price, thanks to a group of quick-thinking magisters who had grabbed their household guards and their families and tried to run for their estates. The eunuch guards in their spiked caps had taken some killing, but few men could rival the Ironborn when it came to handstrokes. It had almost made up for missing out on the plunder.

What had come next had been both enjoyable and disquieting.

Enjoyable, because while the company went out to subdue the countryside, Victarion and his Ironborn had been left in the city to assist Justiciar Baholis in dispensing justice.

A long table was set up in the great market square with seats for Baholis and his fellow justiciars. A quartet of scribes were seated at another table, while a lone chair was placed before the justiciars’ table. This chair was occupied by the magisters and merchants that the Sunset Company had arrested when they had captured the city, who were held in the chair by a pair of Victarion’s reavers while their papers were inspected and their ‘servants’ examined.

Victarion had been disgusted when the Pentoshi dodge around the Braavosi laws had been explained to him. If you wanted to keep slaves, then that was your business; although a true man would have the balls to pay the iron price for them instead of the gold price. But if you were forbidden from keeping slaves and couldn’t throw off the prohibition with axe and sword, then you had no business trying to do so anyway. If you broke the laws and couldn’t protect yourself against the consequences, then you deserved what you got.

Every ‘servant’ who was determined under examination to be a slave was immediately declared free and awarded compensation out of their former master’s assets. In each case, the compensation awarded was the maximum amount permitted under Braavosi law.

The justiciars defined slavery . . . broadly.

“Young master gave money to your former master when you entered their service?” inquired one. “The payment received for your services did not cover the cost of your bed, board, and clothing?” asked another. “You were branded and wore a collar?” asked a third. “Sounds like slavery to me,” said Baholis.

Freed, maximum compensation awarded.

Nine in ten of the ‘servants’ examined were freed in this way. For the rest, the justiciars inspected their masters’ records. In eight cases out of ten, this inspection provided proof of slavery, with the result of freedom and maximum compensation. Every ‘servant’ for whom there were inadequate records, or no records at all, was also freed at maximum compensation.

The justiciars’ definition of adequate records was . . . rigorous.


Freed, maximum compensation awarded.
Some of the slaveholders tried to object. A blow from a reaver’s fist and a snarled warning sufficed to silence them. *You’ll show respect for the honored justiciars, crows eat your eyes. Next time you mouth off, you’ll spit teeth. Time after that, you’ll spit guts. Try us, you soft-handed, spineless bastard.*

What had come next for the slaveholders had been less enjoyable but still compelling. Every man found guilty of possessing slaves was stripped of all their property and hauled aside to be confined in the dungeons below the Prince’s Palace until such time as they could be transported to Braavos to spend the remainder of their lives as oarsmen in the republic’s galleys. Any found guilty of trading slaves, either from abroad or within the borders of Pentos, was likewise stripped of property, but instead of confinement they were sentenced to death and beheaded on the spot; Victarion had taken his turn at the duty, at Dagmer’s recommendation. It had kept the grumbling at becoming common executioners down, anyway; in fact, quite a few of the men seemed pleased that the Braavosi were, through them, exacting the iron price for the breaking of their laws, although it was agreed that Baholis should wield an axe himself on at least one or two of the slavers, for his own honor’s sake. A few from each class of prisoner, those who had possessed or traded particularly large numbers of slaves, or who had abused them more than usual, were turned over to their victims, who invariably killed them.

That last part had kept the whole experience from being an unalloyed satisfaction. Victarion had been a boy when his father had declared the thralls of the Iron Islands free, but he remembered the outpouring of joy and gratitude from the thralls when it was announced. One old man, bent and withered from the mines, had all but kissed his father’s boots when he was informed, weeping with happiness. Most of the slaves here had had a similar reaction. A few had seemed more bewildered than anything, and one or two had even looked frightened, but many had wept, or invoked the favor of the gods on the justiciars, or danced for joy. One stuck in Victorion’s memory: a young woman, barely more than a girl and remarkably beautiful, who had prostrated herself before the justiciars and said something in a rolling, guttural language that had made Baholis turn red and cough in what sounded like embarrassment before waving her away. Victarion hadn’t known what she had said, but he could guess.

Vicarion knew that the thralls his family held in servitude had been well-treated, as such things went. Their food and clothing had been assured, and only the worst had been flogged, or sent into the deepest of the mines. Certainly, he had never heard of any suffering the abuses that some of the slaves here had recounted receiving at the hands of the justiciars.

Why, then, had they reacted in much the same way as these freed slaves?

Vicarion shook his head irritably. Such thoughts were for maesters and maybe his brother Euron, who fancied himself a . . . what was the phrase, something Essosi . . . philosopher, that was it. Victarion’s skill was with the axe, not with the mind.

But the similarities still made him lie awake at night.

XXX

Eddard knelt on the edge of the road north out of Pentos, surrounded by his lieutenants. “What’s the next one?” he asked Ethan Glover, who had effectively become his squire since they landed in Essos.

Ethan spread out the map of the Northern Flatlands they had been provided with and traced their progress up the northward-bound road. “Something in Valyrian that I can’t pronounce,” he said sourly, “although as best I can make out it translates into Common as ‘Fair Oaks’.” He consulted the sheaf of notes that had come with the map. The Titan had many eyes, aided in no small
measure by Owen Merryweather, who had offered to host a feast for the Sunset Company’s officers at the first opportunity. “Apparently it’s owned by some bugger named Illyrio Mopatis, trader in cheeses and spices, among other things.”

“’Other things’ meaning slaves, no doubt,” rumbled the Greatjon, cracking his knuckles.

“Was he in the city when we took it?” asked Mark Ryswell.

“Apparently not, as he was in disfavor with the Prince,” Ethan answered, scanning the notes. “It seems he was married to the Prince’s cousin, but she died a few years ago and he recently remarried, to a pillow house worker of all things. Apparently the Prince took exception.” There was a round of nods; none of the lords present would take it kindly if an in-law of theirs had dishonored the memory of their relation by marrying a whore. “In any case we have a writ for him. It appears his star was rising despite the Prince’s enmity; he only bought Fair Oaks two years ago, ‘hired’ about two hundred ‘bond servants’ to work the fields about the manse.”

There were low growls from the Northmen. In the past two sennights since marching out the northern gate, they had captured four great estates and half a dozen smaller ones and found slaves on each of them. These slaves hadn’t been disguised as ‘servants’ either; they had been collared and branded, and many of them had borne the scars of the lash.

The owners of those estates had been absentee masters for the most part, preferring to live in the city and leave the running of their estates to an overseer and a small troop of guards. These men had either tried to resist against heavy horse and infantry and died for it, or they had been killed afterwards, either by the newly liberated slaves or by Northern soldiers outraged at the evil they had witnessed. On the first estate they had liberated, Eddard had come across an overseer who had been flogging a woman when the Northmen rode up; apparently her crime had been that she had broken a certain vase that the master had prized while she was cleaning the house.

Eddard had beheaded him on the spot, along with every other guard on the estate. On every estate afterwards, any overseer or guard who was taken alive after offering resistance was given the same treatment, either by Eddard himself or by any of the other Northmen. Mercy to the guilty was cruelty to the innocent, as the saying went.

“Same method as the others, I assume?” Maege Mormont asked, cocking an eyebrow at Eddard, who nodded.

“Aye,” he said, putting his finger to the map. “Arnolf, take your horsemen and swing around the estate to the east. Mark, take your riders straight up the road and cut off any escape to the north. Greatjon, your foot will be responsible for securing the manse while Wendell’s men clear the grounds. Don’t bother announcing yourselves, we can do that later.” In strictest law, they were required to announce themselves and summon the person or persons named in their writ of arrest to surrender before assailing them, but Justiciar Baholis had given them discretion to modify their methods if they deemed it necessary. Given such instructions, and their increasing revulsion at what they were witnessing, the Westerosi were reverting to the rules of war, where fair warning was not required. “If this Illyrio surrenders himself, we will send him back to Pentos for judgment. If he chooses to resist,” Eddard shrugged, “then he should have known better. Let his deeds be upon his head.” There were wolf-like smiles from his lieutenants. The one magister who had been on his estate when they captured it had been killed while resisting arrest; the fact that he had not been resisting very effectively was not remarked upon. If a man drew a sword, then he accepted responsibility for whatever happened to him afterwards.

Eddard stood and slapped dust off his poleyn. “Mount up, my lords.”
“What in the fuck,” Robert asked flatly, “is all this?”

A crowd of women was seething in front of a long low building with only one entrance and a few small windows. Some had fallen to their knees and were rocking back and forth, weeping. One had somehow gotten her hands on a knife and stabbed herself; two soldiers were frantically trying to stem the flow of blood from her torso. But the rest, almost fifty women, were trying to get at the quivering magister who had surrendered and was now being guarded by a squad of halberdiers who were fully occupied in holding the women at bay with the staves of their weapons. Gently holding them at bay, because almost all of the women were visibly pregnant.

“Apparently, my lord,” said the squad leader, a grizzled veteran with sweeping mustachios, “the magister here ran the place as a school for pleasure slaves. Bought up young women slaves from the slaverunners and had them taught how to please a man.” The sergeant’s face hardened. “As for why they’re pregnant, apparently the magisters paid more for slaves who were proven to be fertile. Less risk in natural increase than in shipping in new stock past the Braavosi, or so that one’s bookkeeper told us when we put iron to him.”

Robert controlled his gorge with difficulty. Gods knew he had a roving eye and a love for the ladies himself but this was . . . cruel.” What happens to their children?" he asked softly, remembering his daughter in the Vale, his little Mya.

“Sold on to other magisters, my lord, again according to the bookkeeper,” said the sergeant. “Apparently it’s the fashion here for noble children to have a slave companion their age.” His face grew bleak. “In addition to which . . . the bookkeeper told us that they catered to all tastes, my lord. Er, permission to get drunk tonight, my lord? I could have done without knowing a few of the things that yon bookkeeper told us.”

Robert was too far gone in shock, dawning horror, and growing anger to do more than gesture assent to the sergeant as he walked his horse over to the magister and dismounted. Children, for the love of the Gods. “Why?” he asked the portly magister, his voice shaking.

The magister fell to his knees and clutched at Robert’s greaves. “Mercy, lord,” he babbled. “Mercy, I beg—”

Robert cut him off with a roundhouse slap with his gauntleted hand that opened a gash on the magister’s cheekbone and knocked him sprawling. “I asked you a question, slaver!” he roared, snatching his hammer from its holster at his saddlebow. "Why, Hells take your soul?! Children, for the Gods’ sakes!"

The magister touched his split cheek, looked at the blood on his fingers, and became very calm, the fear on his face replaced by a cold uncaringness. “Because it fulfilled a need and I was paid well for it,” he said, his voice cool. “Why not? It’s not like they were important or anything,” he continued, picking himself up and dusting off his robes. “They were slaves to begin with, and mine to dispose of. Simply a matter of business.”

Robert’s war hammer was a mighty weapon; a seven-pound serrated square hammerhead backed by a pyramidal spike a foot long and topped by a spear-point the size of a man’s hand counterbalanced at the other end of the three-foot haft by a round iron ball filled with three pounds of lead. With Robert’s herculean arm propelling it, it could collapse a breastplate or cave in a helmet.

When Robert, blind with red fury, brought it up and around and swung it into the side of the
magister’s head, the magister’s skull did not break as much as it shattered.

Robert came back to himself almost a full minute later, breathing heavily as he stood over the magister’s pulped corpse like a bear over its kill with the whole courtyard staring at him in a mixture of awe and terror. Finally remembering who and where and what he was, he spat on the magister’s corpse and turned to the mustachioed sergeant, absent-mindedly pulling a cloth out of his belt. “See to it that these women are cared for,” he commanded as he began to clean the gore off his hammer. “We have some women with the baggage train; see that they lend what help they can give. No man is to touch them unless explicitly invited.” He stared into the sergeant’s eyes, round with shock. “Is that clear?”

The sergeant nodded so hard he almost gave himself whiplash.

XXX

_I have made a mistake_, Jaime Lannister thought ruefully as his head twinged.

He had heard rumors for the past sennight that the magisters and landlords of the southern Flatlands had entered into negotiations with sellswords to defend their estates, but he had discounted the rumors. Most of the wealth available to the magisters was either coin deposited in the counting-houses and moneylender’s vaults in Pentos city, and hence taken by the company and the Braavosi, or else it was tied up in their slaves. He had not thought that they would have the liquid wealth to hire mercenaries.

Apparently he had been mistaken.

He had been marching down the southward road out of Pentos for two sennights now, doing the same thing that Stark, Tully, Corbray, and Baratheon were doing in the rest of the Flatlands; executing writs of arrest for magisters who had been out of the city when the company had conquered it and liberating the slaves on the hinterland estates. In order to cover more ground faster, Jaime had split his cavalry into half a dozen flying columns, each comprising fifty knights and men-at-arms who ranged outward from the main body of infantry to strike at estates beyond their line of march. Chafing at the slow progress of the infantry, he had given Tygett command and taken control of a flying column, ranging two days ahead of the infantry.

Which had left him and his men isolated and exposed to a counterblow, such as the one that had fallen upon them that morning.

They had been trotting along the road when a body of a hundred cavalry burst out of a small copse two hundred yards off their right flank. Jaime had been about to wheel his men and countercharge when he had spotted a similarly-sized troop of cavalry appear on their left out of a fold in the earth. Throwing circumspection to the wind, he had chosen to charge the horsemen on the right anyway, hoping to break them quickly and then turn on the horsemen who were now behind them.

He had broken the cavalry in front of him alright, the Western knights tearing them off their horses with their long lances and hacking them from the saddle with sword and axe, but he had taken too long about it, and the horsemen behind them had caught his knights almost at a standstill. Only three things had saved them. Firstly, the intermingling of the Western knights with the Essosi horsemen had diluted the impact of the charge. Secondly, the plate armor of the knights made them all but impervious to single-handed sword-strokes and difficult to bring down even with axes and war hammers, while their opponents had been rather more lightly armored in mail-shirts or brigandines, and hence comparatively vulnerable. Third and lastly, when it came to handstrokes Gregor Clegane was the finest battler in the world. He had stuck to Jaime’s left flank like he was tethered there and the two of them had rampaged around the battle like tavern bouncers, breaking
apart knots of enemy horsemen and rallying the knights to them by ones and twos until the Essosi had broken.

Jaime hadn’t wanted to take the Mountain with him, but Father had insisted. He would not, he had said in that terribly final tone of voice that Jaime had learned to respect at a young age, suffer his heir to come to harm through lack of protection, and so Jaime had accepted Clegane as his personal bodyguard. Father had then taken him aside and told him that if Clegane broke discipline, then he was to have no qualms about executing him on the spot. Having the meanest dog in the district at your beck and call was a fine thing, he had said, but a dog that wouldn’t obey orders was good only as food for more obedient dogs. Jaime had agreed readily; he didn’t know exactly what Clegane had done to Princess Elia, but he didn’t think it would be too hard to guess. The Mountain had a reputation.

Jaime bit back bile that wasn’t just caused by the axe-blow that he had taken on the helmet. His first serious engagement as an independent commander and he had been defeated. By common sellswords, no less; a hastily interrogated prisoner had told them that they were men of the Company of the Rose. He had lost twenty men dead and five badly wounded, although for a mercy none of them had been too badly wounded to ride. Even so, the fact of his defeat burned at him like acid in his bowels.

At least he had carried himself well in the actual fighting, and had gotten at least some of his knights away safely. The thought of being captured himself was not to be borne.

XXX

Tygett Lannister scowled as Jaime told his tale of ambush and defeat, and the loss of half his force. *I told you it was a bad idea, but would you listen,* he groused to himself as he turned to his gallopers. “Ride out to the flying columns,” he said. “Order them to rejoin the main body at once. I also need one of you to go to each of the other divisions and inform them that we need them to reinforce us. These magisters seem to want to make a fight of it.” As the gallopers conferred among themselves and cantered away, after glancing at Jaime who impatiently waved them on, he turned to his brother. “Gerion, we need to turn around and go back north to regroup with the rest of the company. I’ll get the column turned around, but I need you to take our outriders and screen our retreat. We need to find out what we’re facing here and we need to keep it off our backs while we get out of this mess.”

Gerion nodded, his normally twinkling eyes deadly serious. “I shall arrange,” he replied, turning his horse and cantering away, calling for the officers of the outriders.

Tygett turned to the two other senior officers among the Westermen. “Lyle, Addam, I need you to help me get this traveling fair turned around. I want our infantry formed up in a box around the baggage train, with our horse, when we get them back, formed up on each corner to watch for ambushers and escort the column. Lyle, you’ll have the rear of the column, Addam, you’ll have the front.”

Addam Marbrand frowned. “We’re retreating?” he asked incredulously.

“We just lost one in twelve of our heavy cavalry, we’re marching through enemy territory with what’s left of our heavy cavalry scattered to the winds, and our nearest reinforcement is two and a half sennights away,” Tygett said dourly. “You bet your ass we’re retreating; at least until we consolidate our forces, reunite with the rest of the company, and get a better idea of what we’re facing.”

Lyle Crakehall glanced at Jaime, who nodded affirmation, and nodded himself. “I can buy that,” he
rumbled. “I’ll keep the rear of the column together, Ser Tygett, if I have to hold them together with my bare hands.”

“Good, because you might need to,” Tygett replied, turning to back to Addam. “Addam, if you run into opposition ahead of you, I’ll need you to plow through it. Don’t go so fast that you leave us behind, but don’t let anyone or anything stop you.”

Addam nodded, his face turning serious. “I will, Ser,” he said simply.

“Then go on, get to it,” Tygett said, waving the young knights away and turning in his saddle to glare southward. His fool nephew had gotten soundly thrashed and escaped death or capture by the skin of his teeth, but with any luck, they could keep the rest of the division from suffering disaster, at least until they were reinforced. And when we come south again, he vowed to himself, we’ll see how well these magisters make war against an army.
The Breaking of Chains

Tygett sighed in relief as the Rivermen joined him at their camp outside the walls of Pentos. He had managed to keep the Westermen together despite harrying raids by mercenary horsemen and established an entrenched camp just outside the walls of Pentos, but the arrival of the Rivermen doubled his numbers and gave him the ability to do more than simply defend himself if he was attacked in force. The fact that Victarion Greyjoy had marched half his men out from the city to join them had been even better; the ballads emphasized the prowess and chivalry of the knights, but Tygett knew that actual battles turned on good infantry. The ironborn might not have the discipline to stand against a charge of knights, but he couldn’t ask for a better force of cutthroats to throw into a melee.

Ser Brynden Tully rode up to him and clanked his gauntleted fist against Tygett’s. “Not bad,” he said, sounding genuinely admiring. “Any idea what you’re facing?”

“The Company of the Rose, at least,” Tygett answered, “along with about two thousand infantry. Apparently the southern magisters decided to try and fight for their lands.”

Gerion rode up, catching the last sentence as he reined in. “I don’t think their foot are anything to worry about,” he said, taking off his helmet and shaking out his hair. “From what little the outriders saw of them, they seemed to be slaves carrying hand weapons for the most part, along with some household retainers. I doubt they’re wielding anything more than pitchforks and billhooks, at least for the slaves.”

Brynden waggled his head. “Even so, I’d rather wait until further reinforcements arrived before we tried attacking them. Robert’s only a day behind me, and Eddard will be here in five or six days. After that, I’ll take our chances against any army in this quarter of Essos.”

“We can’t let them pen us up for too long,” Gerion observed. “The men won’t stand for it, especially with reinforcements. The Ironborn are all but demanding that we march on the enemy.”

“They can wait two days, at least,” Brynden replied. “That’ll give us a thousand heavy horse and just under two and a half thousand foot. I’d prefer to have Ned’s lot with us, but I’ll still take those odds.” He paused. “How’s Ser Jaime doing?”

Tygett shrugged. “He’ll keep,” he said. “ Took a whack to the head, but it didn’t knock all his brains out and may have knocked some sense back into him. Although I pity whatever sellsword gets in his way when the battle starts.” He stroked his beard. “So today and tomorrow to hold them and let Robert arrive, and the day after to fight them. I’ve got some ideas already, Ser Brynden, but first I want you to take a look at the ground around here . . .”

XXX

Tomar of Norvos, Captain of the Company of the Rose, stormed into his tent with a thunderous expression on his weathered face and anger smoking off his blocky frame. “Out,” he snapped at his body slave and his concubines, and as they scuttled out he seized the table and flipped it over with a roar of disgusted rage.

Still his employers had yet to find their balls! Two days now they had camped before the walls of Pentos, watching reinforcements flood into the Andal camp, and all the magisters wanted to talk
about was ‘exploring channels’ and ‘coming to mutually beneficial solutions.’ Tomar snorted in
disgust as he snatched up a bottle of Tyroshi brandy and knocked the top off of it with his dagger.
If they had had the least hope of succeeding he would have wished them luck, but did the silly
buggers seriously think they could outbid the Iron Bank?

And even if they could have, he thought as he tipped the bottle back and let the brandy burn down
his throat, they would have had to find a receptive ear. It was well known that the Andals hated
slavery like poison, the Gods knew why, and apparently this lot had been recruited specifically to
stamp out slavery in Pentos. The Pentoshi clearly didn’t have a prayer of retrieving the situation,
not against six and a half thousand men with only his seven hundred and thirty-eight horse, their
sons and retainers dressed up as cavalry, and their slaves.

Tomar spat. That was the other thing; did these fat idiots really think that their slaves would fight
and die for them? Even if the slaves loved their masters so much, if they were men with any
fighting spirit they wouldn’t be slaves to begin with. If he had known that the magisters were so
hard up for solutions, he would have laugh in their faces and extended his services to the
Braavosi.

But he hadn’t known, and his word, publicly given, could not be retracted. A sellsword who broke
his contract unprovoked was a sellsword who couldn’t be trusted, and a sellsword who couldn’t be
trusted was a sellsword that no one would hire.

He rose from where he had sat on his bed and stalked out of his tent. The day was wasted anyway;
he might as well find someone to drink with.

XXX

Jaime Lannister was not usually given to strong emotion. He tended more towards a quiet stoicism,
leavened by a gift for sarcasm that could almost pass for humor, if you didn’t examine it too
closely. This inclination had only been strengthened by his time in the Kingsguard; there were
things he had heard, standing guard on the royal apartments, that didn’t bear thinking about. The
only thing to do with those memories was to put them away in a back corner of your mind and not
bring them out again.

So the anger that coursed through his veins at the sight of the sellsword banners fluttering in the
morning breeze burned like wildfire. The authors of his disgrace were on the field and, by special
dispensation of the gods, were opposite his knights. Jaime clenched his jaw to beat back the fury
that threatened to cloud his mind. Nerve cold-blue, blade blood-red, his teachers had all taught
him, and the maxim had served him well. Besides, he intended to enjoy his revenge.

He was two horse-lengths ahead of the line of his knights, riding alone but for Gregor Clegane,
who had outright refused to leave his side and was sitting a half-length behind him on his left. He
no longer actively wanted to die, but the shame of his defeat still lurked in his mind. He could see
the half-pitying gazes his knights were casting at his back even now, regarding the fool who had
lost his first proper battle and gotten half his men killed, and felt them like knives in his back.

He intended to conquer, and so expunge that shame, or die and be rid of it.

At long last, the horn sounded from the center, where Baratheon had his standard. Jaime closed his
visor with the edge of his shield and raised his lance to signal the advance.

XXX

On the left of the formation, Brynden Tully sent a quick prayer to the Warrior to guide Jaime’s
charge. He had every confidence that Jaime and his knights could break the sellswords, but the gods laughed at the plans of men.

The Blackfish went over the plan again in his mind. On the right, Jaime and his knights would engage the Company of the Rose and destroy or at least entangle them, while Brynden Tully’s Rivermen did the same with the company of horsemen on the left flank; sons and retainers of the Pentoshi magnates, according to their intelligence. In the meantime, Robert’s Stormlanders and Reachmen, with Victarion’s Ironborn, would hold in the center and wait to see what the slaves would do. A deserter last night had brought them tales of widespread disaffection in the ranks of the armed slaves and a general unwillingness to die for their masters.

Brynden only hoped that disaffection would yield something. He had little stomach for killing the people he was supposed to be liberating. He raised his own lance, and the cavalry of the Riverlands spurred their horses forward.

XXX

Tomar spat into the dust beside his warhorse. The enemy was already advancing and the magisters had only just gotten their armed slaves into ranks. The so-called ‘company’ of magisters’ sons and retainers was still mounting up and forming ranks, for gods’ sakes.

Now the Andals’ right flank was advancing and the only force Tomar had to counter it was his own company. Tomar hated going head to head like this, but there was nothing else for it. Any hope of victory depended on keeping the enemy horse away from the infantry. Against other infantry, they might, might, serve well enough, especially once fear made them savage. But if the horsemen ever got into them, they would be meat on the butcher’s block.

It was an article of faith among sellswords, and most other soldiers, that heavy cavalry with proper leadership would defeat an equivalent number of infantry any day of the week, given the opportunity to charge home. It was why so many sellsword companies were mostly or even exclusively cavalry.

Tomar turned to his men, most of whom he had known for years. “Follow me, the Rose!” he roared, drawing his sword and levelling it at the advancing knights. “Hell or plunder!”

“Hell or plunder!” the Company of the Rose chorused back at him as they spurred their horses forward and drew their swords.

XXX

The Company of the Rose was an old company. In almost three centuries, they had fought everything that the continent of Essos could throw at them, from Dothraki to Unsullied. But they had not faced Andal knights in a massed charge.

This was not strictly their fault. The prerequisite conditions for the development of mounted knights (open country, good horses, and a military aristocracy) did not exist in Essos. To be sure, Essos had open country and good horses in plenty, but the aristocrats of Essos, in large part, were merchants or landlords rather than warriors. Fighting was work for mercenaries or slaves, not noblemen. In Braavos, where what the aristocracy were of a more martial bent, social pressure militated against their fighting as a separate corps of armored cavalry. In Braavos, noblemen served either as marines on the republic’s galleys, or as officers in the pike-wielding regiments of the city’s army.

Moreover, Westeros had only rarely intervened in Essos. Westerosi came to Essos all the time, but
they were traders, sellswords, or diplomats, and they rarely came in numbers. United Westeros had only fought against the denizens of Essos’ western littoral twice. In the Dance of Dragons, the fighting had all taken place at sea, and in the War of the Ninepenny Kings most of the fighting had taken place either on the Stepstones against pirates, or in the Disputed Lands against sellswords. The Essosi city-states had decided they had nothing to learn from such bagatelles.

To be fair, there were Andal-style knights in Essos, in the form of the Golden Company, but they were all but unique, and often enough the Golden Company’s reputation alone was able to decide a conflict. It had been years since the Golden Company’s knights were called upon to charge the enemy in massed formation.

So when the Sunset Company imported twelve hundred knights and five hundred Northern heavy horse (distinguished from knights only in their lack of the title Ser), it imported a mode of fighting never properly introduced to Essos, and consequently devastating against those who faced it for the first time.

When the Company of the Rose rode onto the field of Pentos, they were equipped as heavy cavalrymen after the Essosi fashion, wearing half-armor and wielding hand weapons atop medium-weight horses. Against them, the Western knights were wearing full plate, for the most part, save a few poorer men-at-arms who wore half-plate over mail, and wielded lances in addition to swords and other hand weapons, while their horses were on the heavy end of the medium-weight spectrum. The relatively light equipment of the Essosi made them quicker off the mark and more maneuverable, as well as more sustainable over a long campaign of hard marching.

In a charge, though, they were far outclassed.

Captain Tomar did not live long enough to learn this lesson, however; Jaime Lannister’s lance spearred through his brigandine and tore him out of the saddle in a spray of blood. He was dead before he hit the ground. Bare seconds later, the same thing happened to nine in ten of the Company of the Rose’s front rank and almost all of their officers, as the Western knights hit them. Most cavalry forces would have broken instantly, but the men of the Company of the Rose were hardened veterans for the most part, and even their newest recruits fought hard; cowards did not take up the life of a sellsword.

Courage, however, is a poor substitute for armor, and over the next twenty minutes, the Company of the Rose was destroyed. Of seven hundred and thirty-eight men, only one hundred and eighty-two escaped the melee, where the knights of the Westerlands were cutting their comrades to pieces. Of those, only ninety-seven would be listed as ‘present, fit for duty’ at the next muster they could undertake after the battle. The Company of the Rose had known defeats, but this was their worst.

On their other flank, the Pentoshi cavalry were being even more thoroughly trounced. The magnate’s sons and retainers that made up that corps were largely untested at any sort of martial endeavor beyond dueling or keeping slaves at their work, and although a few of them were splendidly armored, the vast majority of them wore only gambesons or shirts of ring-mail. To pit them against the Riverlander knights and men-at-arms, the vast majority of whom were veterans hand-chosen by no less an authority than the Blackfish, was akin to pitting lap-dogs against mastiffs, and with much the same results.

While the Company of the Rose and the Pentoshi cavalry were being demolished, the first embers of the Slave Wars were bursting into flame behind them.

XXX

Hastron Ordello, head of the League of Magisters, frowned sourly as the Company of the Rose
rode out to meet the Andals. He had told Tomar not to bring on a general engagement until he was signaled to do so, but here they were. See if we pay him his victory bonus after this insubordination, Ordello thought savagely as he gestured at his trumpeter. “Sound the advance,” he said casually, sipping at his morning hippocras.

The trumpeter swung up his instrument and belted out the two rising notes that signaled the army to advance and crush the enemies of Pentos. Officers drew their swords and roared the order to advance.

Not one bond servant in the ranks of the infantry moved.

Ordello could not believe his eyes. For a long moment he blinked quizzically at the stationary ranks of bond servants before he gestured to his trumpeter again. “Sound the advance,” he repeated, “as loud as you can.” Again the trumpet blared, again the officers roared.

Again the bond servants ignored them.

Ignored them!

Ordello shot to his feet, throwing his goblet away in sudden anger. “Gods below!” he shouted. “Is it mutiny?! I’ll have them at the whipping post so long the ants will be able to crawl up their hair to get at their eyes!” He strode over to his horse and hoisted himself into the saddle; in his younger days he could have vaulted from ground to saddle, but these days he was too broad and his legs no longer had the necessary strength. The hint of personal decline did nothing to help his spleen. Snapping, “Follow me!” at the score of young gentlemen whom he had made his personal guard, he trotted out to the nearest company. By the time they arrived he was in a surpassing rage.

“Are you deaf?!” he roared as he reached the company. “Advance, damn you!”

The bond servants cast sullen glances at him, but they didn’t move.

“By the gods!” Ordello screamed, losing his temper entirely. “You will advance or I will have every mother’s son of you flogged until you can no longer stand! Advance!”

A bond servant in the front rank looked up at him and said, quite calmly, “No.”

Ordello gaped at him, unsure whether he could trust his senses. First bond servants refusing orders, and now saying no to their masters?! It was appalling, unthinkable. “What?” he croaked, his voice throttled by shock and rage.

“No,” said the bond servant, a tall fellow with the heavy muscles of a laborer or a farm hand whose Dothraki blood was as evident in his copper skin and black hair as it was in his thick accent. “We not fight.”

Ordello gaped at him for another moment, and then, seized by a paroxysm of fury, brought up his riding crop and slashed it down at the bond servant’s head.

The bond servant caught it, suddenly glaring at Ordello. “I Akhollo, son of Jhazamo, blood of Khal Hannarbo’s blood,” he said, his voice suddenly fierce. “I no longer be whipped like slave.”

Ordello gobbled incoherently. This was madness, the end of civilization. “Kill him!” he finally shrieked, releasing the crop to point at the bond servant who had dared to refuse his master’s commands. The affront to nature that could not be allowed to stand. “Kill him! Kill them all!”

The bond servant threw his head back and gave voice to a yipping howl that echoed over the ranks
of the bond servants. “Free or dead!” he bellowed, lunging forward with the crude spear he had been given and burying it in Ordello’s gut.

The last thing Ordello heard before he blacked out from the pain was two thousand bond servants resounding the call to insurrection.
“Fighting battles without me, are you?” Eddard said mock-chidingly as he accepted a goblet from Robert’s squire; it had been a dusty ride and Robert’s tent wasn’t exactly cool, although it kept the sun off at least. “If I knew you were that desperate for a challenge, Robert, I’d have offered to spar with you.”

“Only if you let me use my hammer, Ned,” Robert said laughingly. “I like to win sometimes.” With his hammer in his hand, Robert could beat the world, but when it came to swords, Eddard was his better. Eddard wasn’t remotely the artist with the sword that Ser Arthur Dayne was, or Ser Barristan Selmy, but he was certainly a good craftsman with a sword, being stubborn, canny, and vigorous. “Not that it was much of a challenge anyway,” Robert continued. “Once their cavalry had been broken and their slaves revolted, it was more a matter of chasing down the survivors than anything. Those that the slaves left alive, that is, which wasn’t many.”

Eddard nodded. He had seen the heads mounted on pikes along the circuit of the walls. “How did Justiciar Baholis react to the slaves revolting?” he asked.

“Oh, he was quite pleased,” Robert said, taking a swig from his goblet. “Surprised, but pleased. He’s already offered them Braavosi citizenship, if they’ll accept Braavosi law.”

Eddard blinked. Braavos was one of the most cosmopolitan nations on earth, but to receive Braavosi citizenship, one had to be born on Braavosi lands, or a Braavosi ship, to parents who were themselves citizens. For foreigners to be offered citizenship was a rare thing, and usually only given as a reward for heroic service. “How many of them have accepted?” he inquired. He imagined that many of them had; the chance to go from a slave to a free citizen of a powerful nation would be tempting for anyone.

“About one in five,” Robert said. “The rest want to come with us.”

Eddard looked down at his goblet. “This must be stronger than what I’m used to,” he said. “I could have sworn that you said that four in every five of the slaves we’re talking about want to come with us.”

“I did, because they do,” Robert replied. “And more besides. A lot of the slaves we’ve liberated, or those of fighting age, have decided to follow us. I tried telling one fellow that it was the Braavosi who were freeing the slaves, not us, and the cheeky bugger laughed at me. He said it wasn’t any Braavosi that cut the collar off his throat or killed his master, but an Andal. He said he wouldn’t swear oath to any man but the ones who freed him and his fellows.”

“How many slaves are we talking about here?” Eddard asked slowly.

“Four thousand give or take. So far, anyway,” Robert said. “Most of them men between the ages of fifteen and thirty. They’ve already started asking for weapons.”

Eddard sat back in his chair, mind spinning. Four thousand . . . “We can’t take them,” he said finally. “Not even half of them. What are we going to feed them?”

“By great good fortune, we got here just as the harvest was coming ripe,” Robert said with a twinkle in his eye. “Baholis is putting contingents together to get the harvest in and between our
pay, our victory bonus, and the company’s share of the loot, we should be able to buy up a fair portion of it. Enough to tide us over until we get to Myr, anyway.”

Eddard shook his head. “We still can’t take them,” he persisted. “We can’t arm them, not with weapons worth the name.”

Robert shrugged. “They can cook and carry for us, anyway,” he said. “And the more promising can be given weapons from the Myrmen we kill.”

Eddard slumped forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “And how many of them will fight for our cause?” he asked. “We’re here to avenge Lyanna, not destroy slavery in all of Essos.”

“The one may lead to the other, if what Baholis tells me of the Three Daughters is true,” Robert replied. “Rhaegar is King of Myr in all but name, and in Myr there are three slaves for every freeborn. When those slaves hear that the army that freed the slaves of Pentos is coming their way, what do you think they’ll do? Stay in the fields with their eyes on the ground, when freedom is coming their way?” Robert leaned forward, his eyes intent. “Ned, you know there is no going back for the two of us. Even if we kill Rhaegar and Viserys tomorrow, we will never return to Westeros as living men. For better or worse, our future lies here, in these lands. And whether we like it or not, we are the men who destroyed slavery in Pentos. It wasn’t the Braavosi who broke the chains off these slaves, but us, and the men we command.”

Robert reached out and grabbed Eddard’s knee. “Ned, Ned, I can feel the wind turning around us. When we march south, we will destroy slavery in Myr. We won’t be able to do otherwise; even if we left the slaveholders alone the slaves would flock to our banner in droves. And it won’t stop at Myr either.” Robert’s eyes were feverish now. “Tyrosh and Lys will fight us, sure as death, so we’ll have to fight them back. And in doing so, we’ll destroy slavery in those cities as well. Volantis won’t stomach having us as a neighbor; they’ll fight us too, depend on it. There are five slaves for every freeborn in Volantis; do you think they’ll stand idle when we are riding through the countryside and beating on the gates of the city?” Robert shook his head. “We have shattered the illusion that slavery is the proper order of things, with our victory here. So long as we draw breath, we will be a living message to every slave that freedom is possible, if only you fight for it. We cannot be anything else.”

Eddard stared. He hadn’t seen his foster-brother so transported since the tourney at Harrenhal, when Robert had sung Lyanna’s praises to him over a goblet of Arbor Gold. “Won’t the masters fight back?” he asked hesitantly. “I imagine they’ve put down slave rebellions before.”

“Not when the slaves were backed up by a foreign army,” Robert said with a carnivorous twinkle in his eye. “Much less an army like ours. Ned, the Blackfish’s knights went through the Pentoshi cavalry like an axe through a pastry. If the Essosi are fool enough to fight us in open battle, I’ll stand surety that we’ll hand them their heads every time.”

Eddard looked down into his goblet, his thoughts a-whirl. We could do it, he thought to himself. Gods old and new witness, we could do it. There wasn’t a force between here and Slaver’s Bay that could match them in open battle save for the Golden Company. If the Three Daughters were foolish enough to fight them, the Sunset Company would bowl them over. If they lost men, either to battle, disease, or simply because they wanted to return to Westeros, then the freed slaves would fill the gaps and then some, if the numbers of their current recruits were any indication; they weren’t soldiers, but a few months under Ser Brynden’s instruction would remedy that. And not all of Westeros’ hedge knights and second sons had sailed with them. For the promise of land and titles, they would flood across the Narrow Sea, as they wouldn’t for Lyanna’s sake.

The thought of his sister stilled his swirling mind and brought clarity back to his thoughts. He
looked back up at his foster-brother. “First we kill Rhaegar,” he said. “If Viserys runs, he can keep
until he’s of a man’s years, but Rhaegar must die before we forge this kingdom of broken chains. I
swore an oath.”

Robert smiled ferociously. “As have I,” he said intently. “But when that oath is fulfilled, Rhaegar
will leave a crown in the dirt. I mean to pick it up.”

Eddard smiled back. “You’ve been thinking about this for a while, haven’t you?” he asked in
playful accusation.

“Ever since we finished cleaning up from that battle and I had a word with Baholis and the other
captains about our next moves,” Robert admitted. “Are you in, Ned?”

“Of course I am,” Eddard replied matter-of-factly. “You’ll need someone to do the difficult
thinking for you.” He paused. “Didn’t you tell me once that you were glad to give Stannis the
crown?” he asked. He distinctly remembered Robert telling him on the voyage over that he had
hated every minute that he had been forced to act a king.

Robert shrugged. “Odds are we’ll be spending the rest of our lives at war, Ned,” he observed. “If
not against Lys and Tyrosh, then against Volantis or the Dothraki. I might wear a crown, but I
won’t be sitting on a throne and going to fat.”

Eddard smiled. “Let’s get you your new throne first, before you decide whether to spurn it or not,”
he answered. “In the meantime, let’s call in the others, get the maps out, and put a plan together.”

“And so the brothers swore, and their oath set their feet on the glittering stairs of empire, which
they scaled to dizzying heights, until the fame and dread of their names was spread across the
world and a new world was born in blood and fire.”

- Breakers of Chains by Howard Roberts, published 1939 AC
The Old Country

Meanwhile, in Westeros . . .

There were times when Jon Arryn dearly wished he could allow himself to get drunk. He had plotted and schemed for more than two decades, praying for the opportunity to overthrow the Targaryens. The dragonkings had been a blight upon Westeros, their predilection for the black arts and their unholy preference for mating brother with sister bringing the judgment of the gods upon the Kingdoms. The revolt of the Faith Militant, the Dance of Dragons, the Blackfyre Rebellions, all directly stemmed from the misrule of the Tagaryens. Not even the few kings they had produced who had been worth the name could balance the scales against civil war.

At last, he had achieved his goal. After two decades of careful planning, the Targaryens were overthrown and those few who remained expelled from Westeros. He had lost family and dear friends in the doing of it, but when set against the victory he had achieved it would be churlish to count the cost. The Targaryens were deposed, a king of proper Westerosi lineage sat the throne of united Westeros, and at long last he could be about the business of making Westeros a nation, and not merely a patchwork of quarreling kingdoms.

And then the gods had seen fit to snatch the prize almost entirely out of his hands. Robert, that impetuous, selfish, pig-headed, brilliant young man, had given up the Iron Throne for the sake of his own private quarrel with Rhaegar. And Eddard, who Jon had depended on to keep Robert on a solid foundation, had gone with him. If pressed, he would admit that there was justice in their cause, but he had thought that he had taught Robert better; that a lord’s duty, much less a king’s, was to set aside his own desires and hatreds for the sake of his people’s good.

Eddard at least had seemed to have taken his lessons in that regard to heart. It was Jon’s own folly for forgetting the importance that the Northmen placed on exacting revenge for an injury.

Now Robert and Eddard were gone over-sea and Jon was left to try and salvage the Seven Kingdoms from its second change of kings in less than a year. Fortunately, he had promising material to work with. Stannis was dutiful, conscientious, and had a strong sense of justice that Jon found both refreshing and potentially useful. Quite a few kings could, with some justice, be called ‘the Great’, but their accomplishments tended to be ephemeral, with notable exceptions. Those kings who earned the sobriquet ‘the Lawgiver’, on the other hand . . .

The problem was that Stannis was about as tactfully subtle as a wild boar. When he had learned just how many of the Crownland and Narrow Sea lords had gone into exile with the Targaryen, he had wasted no time in declaring their whole houses attainted and their lands forfeit to the Crown. Rosby, Duskendale, Sharp Point, Brownhollow, Sweetpoint Sound, Claw Isle, Driftmark, every hold occupied by Targaryen loyalists who had followed the dragons into exile had been taken over by royal troops and given to men who had served in the Rebellion; mostly Stormlanders, Rivermen, and Valemen, but also some Westermen and even a few Northmen. What was more, these men were not made lords in their own right, but instead held the title of Royal Castellan and pledged their allegiance directly to the Iron Throne. Only a few of the noble houses of the Crownlands, those like Massey, Buckwell, and Gaunt who had made their peace with the result of the Rebellion and pledged allegiance to the new dynasty, had kept their lands and their relative autonomy. Jon approved of the theory, but the actual doing of it left Stannis vulnerable to
accusations of being even more of a tyrant than Aerys was. Even after Duskendale, Aerys had not enacted such sweeping attainders and confiscations.

The Royal Order of the Storm was another innovation that Jon had mixed feelings about. The Kingsguard could be rightfully said to be defunct, as none of them remained save those in Rhaegar’s service. And even if any had taken service with the new dynasty, their lack of action to prevent the crimes of the Mad King or of the Kidnapper Prince had thoroughly sullied the Whitecloaks’ honor; all the authorities on chivalry, when asked for their opinion, had agreed that a knight who assisted his lord in the commission of a crime brought shame upon himself and forfeited the right to call himself a knight, although they also all agreed that such a knight could not himself be charged with a crime if all they did was obey the orders of their liege-lord. Jon did approve of the way that Stannis had stated that they would number forty-nine; to be sure it would dilute the honor of each individual position within the Order, but the increase in numbers would allow the Order to more effectively guard the royal family and the significance of the number, seven times seven, resonated with the Faithful. Of a certainty the High Septon had been very willing to bless the banner of the Order and witness the oath of its knights, as they were found and inducted. This was proving to take some time as Stannis insisted that his ‘Stormguard’, as they swiftly became known, be selected as much for their commitment to the laws of the Realm as for their skill at arms; so far only twenty-one knights had been selected, while three times as many had been turned away by either Stannis or Lord Commander Penrose, some with harsh words.

Thankfully, the rest of Stannis’ councilors were competent enough, for the most part. Damon Lannister was a weak reed, but the Crown’s finances were recovering well under his oversight. Roose Bolton had reformed the City Watch with singular efficiency; if the smallfolk whispered that the Master of Laws was a sorcerer tainted with the blood of the White Walkers, at least it seemed to help keep crime down. Paxter Redwyne was solid if not inspired, and the Royal Fleet was back up to twenty galleys already, with another thirty set to be completed within the next three months. The only real fly in the ointment was Jon’s distant cousin Gerold, from the Gulltown branch of the family. Not that Gerold was outright incompetent, Jon wouldn’t have nominated him if he had been, but he tended to complacency. For one thing, Gerold was almost blasé about how little news they had from Dorne.

Jon, on the other hand, was positively fearful of the silence from Dorne. They had only learned two things out of Dorne in the past month. Firstly, that Oberyn Martell had left the desert and was now visiting the borderer houses in the Red Mountains. Secondly, and arrived just this morning by fast ship, that Prince Doran had demanded that the men who killed his sister and her children be handed over to him for execution.

Jon sighed wearily. They could not expect a reply from Tywin Lannister for the next sennight or two, but Damon had laughed at the demand; not for all the spices in the east, he had declared, would his cousin give up his pet killers. In any case, Gregor the Mountain, who was the prime suspect, had gone to Essos as the sworn shield of young Jaime and Jon didn’t need to be told that Tywin would eat his own fingers before he would deprive his son and heir of such a protector. The fact that Oberyn would almost certainly take such a refusal as cause for war, even if Doran didn’t, was not remarked upon either by Damon or by Gerold.

Stannis, however, had seen the possible danger when Jon had brought it up after the council meeting, and word had been sent to the marcher lords, both of the Stormlands and the Reach, to be on their guard against incursions from Dorne. Jon knew that it was probably a case of hauling wine to the Arbor to tell the marcher lords to be wary of Dorne, but it had to be done nonetheless; even if nothing came of it, it would demonstrate that the Iron Throne was mindful of the dangers its subjects might face.
Jon put the matter from his mind with an effort of will. Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof, as his confessor insisted on reminding him; he had done all he reasonably could to guard against Dorne, and there were other problems that demanded his time, even if they did not command so much of his fear. At least Stannis had wasted no time in getting Cersei pregnant.

XXX

People did not appreciate hard work; this was something Mace Tyrell had learned time and again over his life.

He was taking advantage of the warm and clear day to walk the gardens, alone for once, save for his faithful bodyguards, but he often forgot their presence. As was fitting for men of their trade; the best bodyguard was one who knew how to make themselves invisible until they were required.

He made a point to thank the men who tended the bounty that gave Highgarden its name. No castle in all of Westeros was more beautiful, more nurturing to the soul. Not only did the gardens give beauty to what would otherwise be sterile stone, but nestled amongst the flowers were vegetables and herbs that would in time grace the castle's banquet tables. The servants claimed it was Garth Greenhand himself who had planned the layout of the gardens but Mace knew otherwise. To be sure, the Greenhand may have laid the original gardens but the centuries since had seen more mundane hands leave their mark. The gardens had been changed and tinkered with and outright replaced several times over the years, either due to blight or simply to whether the lord of the time had a different taste in flowers than his predecessor.

Still they grew strong. And those that made them strong deserved to be appreciated.

But he as Lord Paramount of the Reach was not.

They thought him a fool. Even his own mother, the insufferable woman. Love her as he did she seemed to have no greater ambition than to undermine his authority so that she could rule in his name. Much as she had driven his father to an early grave; Mace couldn’t prove anything, but he knew his father was not such a fool as to ride off a cliff without meaning to.

She had chided him for answering the Kings call. Then when he returned having made peace with the rebels she called him a fool for that. The impossibility of the situation that had confronted him seemed lost on her. Honor had demanded he answer his king’s call. And when Tywin Lannister, that gilded murderer, destroyed the royal family and joined hands with the rebels, his duty to protect his family had demanded that he make peace on the best terms he could get.

Not that the mighty Queen of Thorns cared to see that. No, all were beneath her, all men were fools and all women lesser in wisdom than her. Did she even care how her reputation harmed their house? The Reach was not Dorne where whispers of a woman ruling were met with respect. His proud lords saw only weakness and scorned their overlords for it.

She told him the same thing his own spies did; that many of his bannermen plotted against him. Of course his bannermen plotted against him. It was in the nature of nobles to plot, but what was he to do? Take a cue from Tywin the Terrible and answer dissent with fire and sword, until the Reach ran red with blood?

The lords of the Reach had conspired without respite ever since the Tyrells first sat on the Roseseat; for all their grumbling, Mace had no fear of their rising in open revolt. For one thing, despite the Lannister’s barbarity, the rebels were not all men of Tywin’s stamp. Jon Arryn had been most obliging, and even Stannis seemed to understand the importance of honor.
In fact, Mace thought as he went to one knee at the sight of a weed amongst a rose bush, a rebellion might not be entirely a bad thing.

That was the other reason he did not fear rebellion; his loyal men far outnumbered the vain and the desperate that had to dream of glory because they lacked it and were far more united than the grumblers. Florent paraded his lineage too busily to realize that his pride alienated his potential supporters. The Peakes had earned a reputation for surviving failure, but only by sacrificing anything and anyone who was not essential to their desired goal. The Hightowers delayed and dithered and almost never threw their weight to one faction or another until the outcome was already decided. None of them, or any of the other houses that coveted Highgarden, trusted any of the others to sit the Roseseat.

Not that it mattered. Even if the loyal houses of the Reach were discounted, Highgarden’s lands were rich and its lord was famed far and wide for his generosity to those who served him well. Five hundred knights and men-at-arms wore Mace Tyrell’s livery and ate his food; in all of Westeros, only Tywin Lannister could muster a retinue so strong.

It was a pity what happened with Rhaegar, Mace mused as he examined the rose bush for a way through to the weed. He could hardly believe the prince to be a rapist. Perhaps the lady had sought escape from her boor of an intended? Gods knew that Robert had not been discreet in his wenching. Rhaegar was always a queer man, and certainly he had looked the part of a ‘perfect and gentle knight’, straight out of a lay of the Gardener kings. Had he simply been swept up in the romance of the thing, as men could be?

The whys and the wherefores mattered little, Mace reminded himself. Rhaegar was finished, driven from Westeros’ shores never to return. If he was wise he would destroy Robert Baratheon and make a new life for himself in the east; from what Mace heard, he had found a new kingdom for himself in Myr already.

The Sour Stag was no threat, for all his dourness. Stannis made enemies easily but if he caught even a whiff of dragon in any rebellion aimed at Highgarden then royal knights would come clattering down the Roseroad. And while Mace would never consent to Tywin's dogs being let loose in his lands, they would be an excellent threat to hang over the head of anyone who got ideas above their station.

With skill honed since childhood he plucked the weed out from the rose bush without so much as touching the thorns. If his mother were there she would likely say would that the gods had made him a gardener instead of a lord.

Let her scoff. History would remember him as the lord who shepherded House Tyrell through these uncertain times and expanded their power as he did so. And she and the rest of the mockers would be either forgotten or mocked as his adversaries overcome.

Growing Strong were his houses words; by the favor of the gods Mace Tyrell planned to grow very strong indeed. And it seemed the Dornish dogs were going to give him aid along the way, if what little he heard from that gods-forsaken hellhole had any truth to it. Let the Red Viper bite as he pleased. House Martell’s misfortune would be House Tyrell’s windfall, if Mace had anything to say about it.

XXX

“Item twenty-seven,” Maester Luwin said, “a dispute between Lord Karstark and Lord Manderly regarding their respective rights in the fishing grounds off Skagos.”
“What manner of dispute is it this time?” Brandon Stark asked wearily, “Is it serious, or is it just another pissing contest?”

“Lord Karstark claims that Manderly vessels are taking more than the share of fish that was allotted them by the judgement of King Jaehaerys the First,” Luwin said, scanning the parchment. “Lord Manderly claims that Lord Karstark is, to quote Lord Manderly words, ‘talking out of his ass’, and further states that the Karstarks are the ones fishing more than their share.”

“What kind of dispute is it this time?” Catelyn Stark asked from where she sat at Brandon’s right hand, a fleece robe over her shoulders against the morning chill; even in summer, the North reminded you that winter was never far away.

Luwin shook his head. “Not on the information presented in this letter, my lady.”

“Put it in the ‘investigate’ pile, then,” Brandon said. Luwin nodded and dropped the letter in the appropriate pile. When Brandon reviewed the correspondence of the day, most of which were disputes referred to him for judgment, one of two things happened. Firstly, in cases where the right and wrong of the matter was not in dispute, judgment was given then and there, usually with a quick scrawl of ‘Affirmed’ in Brandon’s own hand at the bottom of the letter. Such cases had usually been already judged anyway and all that was left for Brandon to do was approve them. Secondly, in cases where the facts were in dispute, Brandon would send trustworthy men to investigate the facts and summon the disputants and any witnesses to Winterfell, where Brandon would question them and issue judgment.

These judgments almost always provoked grumbling from the party who had had the decision go against them, but thankfully no one had yet disputed the validity of Brandon’s judgments. If Brandon had had to sentence anyone to death, it might have been different, but fortunately that test had yet to arise. Even so, Catelyn knew, her husband practiced in secret with an axe, against the day when he might have to strike off a felon’s head with his own hands. Those nights he usually came to supper morose.

“Item twenty-four,” Luwin continued, “the Sunset Company has left the service of Braavos and marches south against Myr.”

“Good!” Brandon barked, making their glasses rattle with a blow of his fist upon the table. “I knew my brother would cut loose of the Titan’s strings eventually. Any news of the Raper’s response?”

“None, my lord,” Luwin said, scanning the rest of the letter. “There appears to be no word of any reaction by Myr to the company’s marching.”

“Caught the lizard napping, by the gods,” Brandon said savagely, working his fingers as if they held Rhaegar Targaryen’s throat. “Well, he’ll have a rude awakening, won’t he just? Old Ned’ll see to that, if I know him at all. He’ll have the Raper’s head in a bag before he knows it’s off.”

Catelyn concealed a shudder. She certainly wished her good-brother well, but she hoped with equal fervor that he never returned to Westeros, much less the North. Her husband believed in his brother’s loyalty as she believed in the Seven, but let Brandon misstep one time too many, and his bannermen would rush to set him aside in favor of famous, tested, whole Eddard; she had no illusions about her own chances of survival in that case, much less those of the babe beneath her heart.

Until that day came, however, the best she could do was strengthen her husband’s rule in any way she could and console herself with the knowledge that Rhaegar the Raper was also a dangerous man, and those who guarded him even more so. She did not actively wish that her good-brother
would die on a foreign field on the sword of Ser Arthur Dayne or Ser Barristan Selmy, that would be far too close to kinslaying for comfort, but it would remove at least one danger from her husband’s path.

“Item twenty-five,” Luwin went on, picking up another letter. “A request from Lord Hornwood that you foster his son Daryn when he reaches the right age, in answer to your declaration that you are open to fosterings.”

“By all means,” Catelyn said instantly. “If nothing else, my son will need a suitable playmate.”

“And at the same time, we will be able to ensure Hornwood’s loyalty both now and when Daryn inherits,” Brandon said, smiling at his wife. “Send Halys our approval in tomorrow’s correspondence.”

Rousing the Dragon

Rousing the Dragon

The Conclave of Magisters was often a contentious body, jealous of its prerogatives, but the events of the past year had muted their once-lively debates. The simple fact was that Rhaegar Targaryen was now King of Myr in all but title, thanks to his marriage to the only daughter of Magister Rahtheon, his feats on the borders against the forces of Lys and Tyrosh, and the fact that he commanded the largest single body of armed men in the city, in the form of his fifteen hundred-strong brigade of exiles. He had not crowned himself, yet, but he did bear the titles of Governor of the South and Protector of the City, and the gates of Myr were manned by men wearing the three-headed dragon.

So when the herald arrived bearing a message from the Sunset Company, the Conclave was hesitant about admitting him. To be sure, heralds, like ambassadors, were supposed to be sacrosanct in their persons during the course of their duties, but it was well known that Andals were all mad, and Targaryens even more so. Of a certainty some of the reports from the border skirmishes indicated that Rhaegar fought like a man with little care for his own skin.

Eventually, however, Rhaegar himself had requested that the Conclave admit the herald and receive his message. So the Conclave assembled around the oval table in the Chamber of State, with Rhaegar sitting at the right hand of Magister Rahtheon at the head of the table, and received the herald with the pomp usually reserved for foreign dignitaries. The members of the Conclave were all in their best formal robes, unornamented but perfectly tailored of some of the most expensive cloth available; on one magister’s robe the sleeves were made of silk, part of a consignment imported at vast expense from far Yi-ti. Magister Rahtheon, whose attachment to Rhaegar had propelled him to the position of Gonfalonier of the Conclave, wore the richly embroidered stole of his office draped over his wide shoulders and barrel chest; his sharp-featured face was set in the unreadable expression that had helped him so much in his rise to wealth and power. The herald wore the tabard of his profession, blazoned with the black stag on yellow of the Baratheons.

But by far the most striking man in the room was Rhaegar Targaryen, the Minstrel Prince, the Exile King. His doublet, overrobe, and hose were all of flat black linen, which was saved from being dull by a multitude of small slashings in the sleeves of his overrobe that let his crimson shirt show through like scales. If Rhaegar were even slightly more fair-complexioned the ensemble would have made him look ghostly; as it was, it merely made his handsome face severe, a severity accentuated by the short horse-tail that his hair was pulled back into and the lines on his face that hadn’t been there a year and a half ago.

After the traditional announcement and exchange of greetings, the herald produced a scroll and proceeded to read it aloud.

“From His Lordship, Robert of the House of Baratheon, Captain-General of the Sunset Company, with his captains Lord Eddard Stark, Ser Brynden Tully, Ser Jaime Lannister, Ser Lyn Corbray, and Lord Victarion Greyjoy, to The Conclave of Magisters of the City of Myr, greetings.

“We are informed by reliable report that you have among you the man Rhaegar Targaryen, who styles himself as King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Defender of the Realm. We declare upon our honor that this Targaryen is an outlaw, guilty of the several crimes of kidnap, rape, and murder, the justice of which charges we will prove upon his body at his convenience. We will you, therefore, in the name of the several gods, that you
withdraw your protection from him and expel him from your city. Failing this, we shall have no choice but to consider you his accessories in crime and wage war upon you as harshly as we do upon him, until such time as we are satisfied in our quarrel.”

“Given under our hand at the town of Lucania, in the two hundred and eighty-fourth year after the Conquest.”

The herald lowered the scroll and fastidiously re-rolled it. “There is a second letter, my lords, that I was charged to deliver to Ser Rhaegar himself,” he said after he had finished rolling the scroll and handed it off to one of the Conclave’s secretaries.

Rhaegar stood from his chair. “I am here,” he said calmly. “I pray you, read it aloud.”

The herald bowed, drew a smaller scroll out of his wallet and opened it. He perused the contents, went a little pale, and looked up at Rhaegar. “My apologies, Your Grace,” he stammered, “but the language is most impolitic.”

“Read it,” Rhaegar commanded, his expression growing slightly testy. “In full, if you please.”

The herald bowed shortly and began to read haltingly. “To the . . . kidnapper Rhaegar Targaryen. We are come into this land to seek thee . . . rapist and murderer . . . and we will not leave unless we carry before us . . . your head on a pike. Signed, Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark.”

All eyes turned to Rhaegar as the herald lowered the letter. Rhaegar’s face was white with anger, his nostrils flared in rage, and his eyes all but burned with fury. For a long moment, the only movement in the chamber was a slight stirring of the tapestry depicting the city’s founding in a draft. When at last he spoke, it was in the voice of a maddened dragon. “Your messages are heard,” he said, his tone only barely short of a growl. “Get out.”

The herald bowed himself out the door and almost fled down the corridor. The Conclave eyed Rhaegar nervously as he seemed to strive with himself for a long moment. At last, his expression only slightly relaxed, he turned to Magister Rahtheon. “Hire every sellsword company you can,” he commanded bluntly. “Order every citizen with training at arms to present themselves for military service. We are at war.”

XXX

Lyn Corbray smiled in grim satisfaction. The company had finally marched, after three sennights of preparation that had tried his patience to the limit. If he had wanted to oversee harvests or superintend the purchase of supplies, he’d have stayed in Heart’s Home with his spineless brother. He had come to Essos to cement a reputation founded in the hedgerow fighting of the Rebellion and acquire a fortune, and he planned to do exactly that.

So far, he was off to a good start. He’d picked up a fair amount of coin in Pentos, as well as some lovely items from a few of the manses that his men had liberated that had fetched a pretty penny from a goldsmith in the city who had taken the hint to keep his mouth shut. And if he didn’t stand as high in Baratheon’s esteem as Lannister did after his display in the battle, then he had at least earned some congratulations for what he had done in Pentos.

And if the conquest of Pentos had been profitable, this campaign bade fair to be a proper gold mine. The Myrish magisters were even wealthier than their Pentoshi counterparts and liked to prove it with ostentatious display. Their taste tended to the gaudy, and in some cases bordered on atrocious, but that was all to the better; the more expensive something looked, the more it sold for, in Lyn’s experience. And while he couldn’t volunteer for every foray against the estates that
bordered the company’s line of march, he could certainly convince the knights under his command to volunteer for as many of the rest as they could and keep an eye out for loose valuables, in return for a cut of the proceeds.

Lyn sighed in contentment. The day was as fine as any he had seen in the Vale, with a clear sky and a bright sun warming the earth. He was on campaign against a rich, and so far weak, enemy, with plenty of opportunity to gain wealth now and advancement later, and in the meantime a plethora of the rougher pleasures in life; good horses, good arms, good company, good wine drunk straight from the bottle around a blazing campfire to raucous song, and women for the asking if your tastes ran that way, which Lyn’s didn’t. This was how the gods had meant a man to live.

Lyn’s eye chanced across a figure shambling alongside the man-at-arms two horses ahead of him and his expression soured. Now if only he could get rid of these damned tag-alongs.

It was, he supposed, inevitable. Every estate the company raided had at least a handful of slaves about the manse and more working the fields attached thereto; easily more than a hundred slaves in total, on some of the larger ones. When the estate was raided, the overseer and guards who kept those slaves in line and at their work were killed, along with their master if he was in residence. Either way, the slaves in question now had no one to hold them to their work, and found themselves in the presence of the army that had already liberated one city’s slaves. A few, a very few, had stayed on the estates for reasons of age or fear, but the majority simply gathered what few belongings they had and whatever they felt like scavenging from their master’s possessions and followed the Westerosi back to the company’s lines in a loose cloud, like sparks trailing a flame.

It tried Lyn’s patience. Oh the freedmen had their uses, Lyn himself had a freedman serving as his personal cook and valet, but what in the world was the company supposed to do with elders and children? It wasn’t like they could simply drop them off at a convenient castle; for one thing, there weren’t any castles in this country. For another thing, the company was marching through a hostile land and although the Myrmen seemed to be rather slow off the mark in stopping them, they were bound to wake up sooner or later. If it came to a pass where the company had to outmarch the Myrmen, there was simply no way that any but the young and physically fit among the freedmen would be able to keep pace; the others would just have to be left behind.

And that might prove difficult. Those freedmen of military age who could lay hands on weapons wasted no time in doing so, even if it was just a knife or a heavy tree branch, and they insisted on learning how to use them. If they took it into their heads to object to the unfit and the unhealthy being left behind, it would almost certainly end up being a bloody mess in a very literal sense of the term.

Lyn spat aside. Either way, it wasn’t properly his concern until it happened. He just hoped Baratheon or Stark had thought of it and come up with some clever idea to keep it from getting them all killed.
“How many?” Eddard asked wearily.

“One hundred and twenty-seven,” Lyn said, his face screwed up into the expression of a man talking about a subject he finds distasteful. “Sixty-eight of which are fit men of military age.”

Eddard sighed. “Thank the gods you brought in that estate’s food supplies as well,” he said. “We’ll be able to feed them all for a sennight or two at least. Ethan!” Eddard’s squire trotted up. “Take charge of the slaves in Ser Lyn’s column and get them over to the other unattached freedmen. Tell all fit men of military age to report to the Pioneers.” Eddard turned back to Lyn. “Carry on, Ser Lyn.”

Lyn clanked a gauntleted fist on his breastplate in salute and reined his horse around towards the Valemen’s section of the company’s encampment. Eddard sighed again as he turned his own horse and rode back through the encampment towards the cluster of tents at the center where the captains resided. He wanted to be able to trust Lyn Corbray but he couldn’t bring himself to it. The young Valeman was just too obviously a man of ambition, always keeping an eye out for the main chance. Not that there was anything strictly wrong with that, but both his father and his foster-father taught him that it was best to keep your ambitions close to the chest. His foster-father had held that there were things that it wasn’t polite to discuss in general company; ambitions, women, and most bodily functions, for instance. His father, on the other hand, had been of the opinion that it was a lot easier to keep a secret if you simply didn’t talk about it.

Even so, Eddard couldn’t deny that Corbray had his uses, especially as a captain of raiders. The evidence was present in his column; sixty heavy wagons, all piled high with wheat, oats, rye, and other cereals, all vital to an army on the march and all bound to be slotted into the baggage train. Men could be induced to fight without pay for a time and without shelter for a while, with good weather, but they couldn’t fight without food.

That, in fact, was the main difficulty that the company had had to plan for, and one of the things that the whole campaign turned on. Six and a half thousand fighting men and almost six thousand camp followers eating four or five pounds of food daily required just over twenty-eight tons of food every day. And that didn’t count the food that their horses and oxen and mules required. If they hadn’t crossed the border without warning, thereby not giving the Myrish time to cart away the harvest, they would have been in real danger of starving. Fortunately, not only had they gotten over the border and into the Myrish grain country before the Myrish had reacted, but thanks to the Braavosi spy network they had known which area of the country had had the greatest harvest, and more or less where the most productive estates could be found.

It was the main reason they had not been forced to turn away all the slaves that had flocked to them by the hundreds since they crossed the border. The news that the Sunset Company, the breakers of chains and the killers of masters, had come over the border had raced across the Myrish north-country like a grass fire in a drought and the Myrish slaves had reacted. Many that found themselves with the means and the opportunity had simply fled their masters in search of the company’s lines, but others, unable to slip away, had resorted to more drastic means. Myr as a whole had three slaves for every freeborn, but on the country estates that ratio was more on the order of eleven or twelve to one. And although the overseers and guards were hard men trained to arms and used to violence, a shovel or a hoe or a billhook could kill a man just as dead as a sword...
or spear and ten to one would have been long odds even for Westerosi men-at-arms.

From one end of the Myrish north-country to another servile revolts flared into being as men and women with nothing to lose but lives not worth living seized their chance in both hands. Some uprisings were stamped out with bloody massacre, but more succeeded in overthrowing and slaughtering their oppressors and then struck out for the last reported location of their putative liberators. Some, more by luck than by judgment, found the company by their own efforts. Others came across one or another of the company’s raiding parties and followed them back to the company’s lines. Still others, more poorly led or simply less lucky, had run across one of the bands of irregular horsemen that the local magnates had called into being. These bands, composed mostly of the relatives and retainers of the magnates and often led by the district constables, roamed throughout the Myrish north-country seeking both to maintain order among the slaves by the threat or use of force and to harass the Sunset Company while the Myrish army mobilized.

When the Myrish irregulars and the escaped slaves collided, the resulting combat was invariably ruthlessly brutal; both groups were smart enough to know that their survival depended on the utter extermination of the other. Eddard recalled coming across the scene of one such skirmish that had evidently resulted in mutual annihilation; one slave, stabbed through the ribs with a dagger, had evidently used the last of his strength to strangle the Myrman who had stabbed him. He took care not to think about the times they had found a scene where the Myrish irregulars had triumphed; there were things no sane man wanted to have in his head.

Of course the problem was that, once the slaves reached the Sunset Company and became freedmen, the company had to do something with them. Each meinie, the fighting-tail of the individual lords and knights of the company that could number anywhere from five to five-score, had taken on anywhere from one or two to thirty or forty freedmen to act as cooks, valets, grooms, runners, and general dogsbodies, but that still left several hundred freedmen unattached and without anything to do but get into trouble, which the military-aged fit men among them tended to do when they demanded that a knight treat them like men instead of slaves, to the incomprehension, mild shock, and general consternation of the knight in question. The resulting problem of discipline had been agonized over by the captains for a full sennight until one evening Ser Brynden had frowned and asked, “Why don’t we use them as pioneers?”

When Robert had asked him what the devil he meant, he explained that the Ghiscari legions, and later the Valyrian Freehold, had employed companies of men trained in construction and engineering who were responsible for constructing army camps, building bridges and roads, constructing walls and buildings, and digging mines, among other duties. It was these men, he explained, who had laid the beds of the famous Valyrian roads, although the final paving and sealing of the roads had been done by magic. Of course, getting men-at-arms to do such things would be a nigh-impossibility; even if they weren’t nobles, digging and hauling was the sort of thing they had become soldiers to avoid. On the other hand, the freedmen didn’t have such pretensions, were already used to hard manual labor, and although the company was short of hard cash after buying up about a quarter of Pentos’ total harvest and there was a shortage of proper tools, those without tools could be used to carry and emplace. Even better, it was found that one of the two maesters who had accompanied the company to Essos to chronicle its deeds had forged a few links in architecture; apparently his father had been a stonemason and had hoped that his son might return to the family business. However, despite Maester Gordon’s talent for building his true love was history, hence his reason for volunteering to follow the company.

So the call was put out for volunteers to serve in the Corps of Pioneers at half the rate of a footman’s pay under the direct command of Captain-General Robert Baratheon, Maester Gordon was named as their deputy commander, the sliced-pie arrangement of the company’s encampment was expanded to make space for them, and those volunteers that took the star were brought under
military discipline and their days were filled with either work or training. Some in the company regarded them as a mild joke, but Eddard had to think differently. A day’s march away was a stream whose name translated into Common as Catblood Creek. According to the people they had questioned about the terrain, Catblood Creek wasn’t particularly broad or deep, but it flowed swiftly and its banks were steep-sided. More importantly, there was no ford for twenty miles either upstream or down and, according to a band of escapees who had come in two days ago, the bridge that the company had been making for had been torn down by Myrish irregulars. Furthermore, the company had already stripped almost all the estates within easy reach of the bridge-site of food. The Pioneers would have to earn their pay, or the company would risk being pinned against the creek with no way across. If that happened, they would be eating their draft animals in a sennight, their horses three days after that, and then they would be eating their belts and boots to stave off starvation.

XXX

Maester Gordon beamed satisfaction at his men. “Well done, lads,” he said in his rote-learned Low Valyrian. “Well done indeed. Bloody well showed those joking sods who didn’t think you were worth your feed, didn’t we?”

His men growled agreement, flourishing their tools. In two days, these men, most of whom had never worked a major construction project before, had thrown a bridge across a creek twenty-five feet wide from bank to sheer bank that could take a heavy wagon with a full load. For caution’s sake, they were driving the wagons across one at a time, which would take at least a full day and probably two, but they were getting across, by the gods. And in case there was any doubt about who was responsible for that minor miracle, he had taken the time to paint a sign that read, “Cross Catblood Creek with dry feet, courtesy of the Corps of Pioneers.”

“Second section, remain on duty in case one of the wagons goes in the drink. The rest of you, fall out and have the rest of the evening to yourselves, you’ve earned it,” he said, throwing up his hands. “Dismiss!”

As the Pioneers streamed away to their fires, Septon Jonothor, the senior of the septons who had followed the company to Essos, walked up and surveyed the bridge with a critical eye. “Well done, Maester,” he said, his harsh voice not mellowed by the note of approval. “Although I was almost looking forward to a wade, in this heat.”

Gordon shrugged. “Nothing stopping you, Father,” he said equably. “And the job wasn’t as hard as all that. It was a clapper bridge, initially; basically a pair of bloody great stone slabs held up in the middle by a pile of stones. The Myrish dropped the slabs in the river and tore down the pile; just a matter of reassembling it, really. And putting in new piles underneath the slabs to help them take the weight of the wagons. I’d have preferred to double the width of the bridge, but we didn’t have the materials.”

Jonothor nodded as they watched a wagon inch its way across. They made for an interesting visual contrast. Gordon had inherited the stout build of his stonemason father, with beefy arms, a chest like a barrel, and a broad, amiable face he kept meticulously shaven, despite the fact that they were on campaign and so growing a beard would be understandable. Jonothor, on the other hand, was tall and sparely built, with an angularly severe face that wasn’t helped by his habit of wearing a stern expression.

“Do you truly think that we can actually win?” Gordon asked as the wagon made its way onto dry land. “Not that I doubt the skill and bravery of our captains, of course, but taking on a whole continent smells an awful lot like hubris to me.”
Jonothor shrugged. “If the gods will it so, anything is possible,” he said with a voice of such absolute certainty that it made Gordon blink. “And our captains are sound and godly men, for the most part.” He made a face. “I could wish that we had no pagans among us, but Lord Stark’s grievance is just, and he is properly respectful of the Faith.”

Gordon almost asked what Jonothor thought of Lord Greyjoy, but decided against it at the last minute. Remember why the Archmaesters sent you out here in the first place, old man . . . “And we are not making war against a whole continent, my son,” Jonothor continued. “Only one city, and that weakened by the evils it practices.”

“One city that controls enough territory to rival the Riverlands or the Westerlands in size,” Gordon replied, gesturing at the lightly rolling fields surrounding them; farmland that equaled anything in the Reach and with a climate to match. Myr grew damned near any kind of crop except for citrus, or so he was told. Apparently the climate wasn’t quite warm enough for citrus trees. “And has more people than either of them. These plantations don’t just feed their owners and their slaves, Father, but towns as big as any in Westeros. Ceralia alone has thirty thousand souls within its walls, and Myr city has ten times that many. We have, what, six or seven thousand spears?” Gordon spread his hands. “You have to admit, Father, that the odds do not exactly favor us, even before the rest of the continent is added in.”

“The odds did not favor Artys Arryn at the Battle of the Seven Stars,” Jonothor countered, “but by the gods’ grace and the skill and courage of his men, he triumphed, and so the Vale was conquered. And I tell you again, we do not face the whole continent, but merely one city.”

“One city in this campaign, perhaps,” Gordon said, before turning to his Pioneers where they lounged on the edge of the creek-bank. “Gaenys, keep your hands to yourself! I see you, you light-fingered bugger! But the other cities won’t take kindly to having us for neighbors,” he continued. “Nor will our own men let us live in peace with slavers. My Pioneers have sworn blood-oath that when they get to Myr they won’t leave a single slaveholder alive. And judging by the way they practice at arms when they’re not at work, they mean it.” He shrugged. “I don’t particularly mind dying; I’m an old man. But I’d like to know that I died for a cause that stood a chance of winning.”

Jonothor eyed him. “We fight in a worthy cause, against men who have profaned against the gods by word and deed,” he said severely. “Whether we win or lose, those who fall will be welcomed by the gods as heroes, and sit at their right hands on the day of judgment. But we will not lose,” he continued, eyes burning. “The gods will see that we fight against abomination, and even the pagans among us will receive the Warrior’s strength, and the Father’s hand will shield them. Those we free will flock to our banner, as they did in Pentos, and even the weakest of them will be made as lions by the power of the gods. Even should the slavers march against us in their thousands and their tens of thousands, we shall conquer, for the gods will fight at our side.”

Gordon shrugged. “If you say so, Father,” he said, turning back to watch another wagon rumble off the bridge. “I just hope that the gods give us reinforcements.”

After the crossing of Catblood Creek, the Sunset Company proceeded south towards the town of Ceralia. This town was the hub of Myr’s northern lands, hosting both the largest market and the largest livestock fair in the region as well as serving as the home base of the Governor of the North. This provoked a hasty response from Rhaegar; his hold over Myr was not so strong that he could afford to have one of its major satellite towns fall without fighting for it. And fight for it he would have to. The Governor of the North had sent word that he didn’t have enough soldiers to both hold the walls and prevent a slave uprising within the town, and in any case the town’s defenses were in too poor a state of repair to hold against an assault.
So Rhaegar marched north towards Ceralia with only half the men he had planned on mustering, and despite the slowness of his muster he marched with commendable dispatch; a bare sennight and a half after setting out, the Army of Myr and the Sunset Company met on opposite sides of a shallow valley near the village of Tara.

- Chasing Dragons: The Sunset Company Reexamined by Maester Hendricus, published 1539 AC
The Dragon and the Stag

Rhaegar felt no great swell of pride as he surveyed the Army of Myr. Despite his work over the past year, the fact remained the only part of the army that he could truly rely on were his own exiles; loyal men who had followed him over the sea rather than serve the Usurper or his callow brother. Of the rest, more than half were levied citizens of Myr city and its satellite towns, men who not only would much rather be back in their homes than facing angry strangers on a distant field, but men who considered the profession of arms to be beneath them. To be sure, Myr had bravos enough, and plenty of young men who played the part as they fancied, but aside from dueling to uphold the honor of their house, no proper Myrish aristocrat would dream of going for a soldier except in extremity. Fighting wars was work for sellswords, not noblemen, to the Essosi way of thinking. Speaking of sellswords, almost a third of Rhaegar’s army was made up of them, and it made him nervous. He didn’t doubt that they would stand by their contract; a sellsword who broke their contract was a sellsword that no one would hire, after all. But they were expensive, and not likely to be resilient in extremity. If his coffers ran dry, or the Usurper defeated them, it would not be implausible that they would employ the escape clause in their contract and desert. As they would point out, their contract only specified that they would fight under Myr’s command. It said nothing about fighting to the death in a hopeless cause. And if Rhaegar missed three pay days in a row, then that was sufficient cause for them to break their contract and seek employment elsewhere.

Rhaegar shook his worries out of his head and looked across the shallow valley. He had enough troubles without borrowing more.

Across the valley, the Sunset Company was arrayed in splendor, its lines gleaming with late-summer sunlight on spearheads and thick with banners. Many of them were from the rebel houses, of course, but there were a few from the Reach, a cluster of men under the golden kraken of the Greyjoys, and a whole division flying Western banners under the lion rampant of the Lannisters. Rhaegar felt his blood boil at the sight of the lion banners. *Traitors. Murderers. Oathbreakers.* He clamped down on the building fury with clenched jaw and thinned lips. It would be unseemly for him to rant and rage in public, as gratifying as it might be. His wife and children would be avenged soon enough, now.

But there was one banner that flew above the crowned stag in the center that angered him even more than the Lannister’s; the sunset with the severed dragons-head impaled on the black sword. There could be no clearer statement of intent on Baratheon’s part.

Rhaegar mastered his anger and reviewed the plan in his head. It was quite simple really. March the army forward until the crossbows were in range and then have the crossbows bombard the rebels. If the rebels stood fast to be shot, so much the better. If they advanced, then Rhaegar could countercharge them with his exiles and the three sellsword companies his goodfather had hired, the Long Lances, the Stormcrows, and the Company of the Cat. Just over four thousand cavalry should suffice to handle the rebel knights. And if it came to a general brawl . . . Rhaegar smiled at the thought. Fear would make even the most reluctant of his Myrmens savage, and his army outnumbered the Sunset Company by two to one. All else aside, numbers told.

XXX

Jacaegon Valreos, ‘Jace’ to his friends, hadn’t particularly wanted to be a crossbowman.
However, when the Conclave of Magisters had decreed that every adult male citizen was to learn the crossbow or the spear and spend at least one day in seven at drill with it, the only thing left to do had been to choose which he preferred. Especially since the Andal knights who had been placed in charge of the training program had made it plain that anyone who shirked their new duties would deeply regret it, along with anyone who helped them do so.

Jace had never been a particularly large man to begin with and years as a clerk in his great-uncle’s shipping business hadn’t done anything to improve his physique. So he had chosen to become a crossbowman; the new cranequin-cranked crossbows required almost none of the brute strength that a spearman needed and, with any luck, the enemy would be safely far away when Jace killed them. Not that he was a craven, just sensible; logically speaking, any man he was trying to kill was likely to take offense and would almost certainly be much better at hand-to-hand physical violence than Jace was. Let the Andal madmen have their fun cutting the enemy’s guts out with daggers; if Jace was going to risk his personal, precious hide on a battlefield, then he would stay well out of any melee and kill the enemy from far enough away that they couldn’t kill him back.

Or so Jace had thought, anyway. When he had reported for training, no one had told him that the crossbowmen would be the first ones sent against the enemy.

When the order came down for the crossbowmen to advance, Jace’s first instinct had been to tell the sergeant to piss off; gods all witness that Jacaegon Valreos had no desire whatsoever to walk towards a pack of angry foreigners who would think nothing of killing him in inventively painful ways. Several things, however, had stopped him. Firstly, the sergeant, a former sellsword with an array of scars that was as impressive as it was disturbing, was twice his size and would have no problem at all enforcing the law against disobedience to orders with his bare hands if Jace made any trouble. Secondly, everyone around him had started marching forward, which had both carried Jace along and would have made any attempted malingering instantly noticeable. Thirdly, while the foreigners might kill him, the Andals would certainly kill him if he displayed what gravel-voiced Ser Alliser Thorne, who had read out the Articles of War to them, had described as ‘cowardice in the face of the enemy’.

Fourth and lastly, the enemy weren’t just any pack of foreigners. They were the Sunset Company, the foreigners who had helped the damned Braavosi (he automatically thought the name in his great-uncles harsh voice, followed by a hawked gob of spittle as the old man remembered sundry slights and humiliations) conquer Pentos and overthrow slavery. Jace’s branch of the Valreos family wasn’t wealthy enough to own many slaves, nothing like the hordes that some of the magisters employed in the workshops of the artisans quarter or on the fields of their country estates, but they did own a cook and a housekeeper, as well as his mother’s maid and the nurse who had cared for Jace and his younger sisters. Jace had heard tales of slaves who had mistreated by their masters, and it was true that when the housekeeper had tried to abscond his father had had the constables brand her on the face with the runaway’s ‘R’, but all in all, he saw nothing wrong with slavery as an institution. He did believe that a master who had to enforce discipline with chains and the lash was a poor master, but taken as a whole, he believed that slavery was the way the world was meant to be, and that both master and slave benefitted. The master received the slave’s service, and in return the slave was fed, clothed, and housed, and could be rewarded for exemplary service. But the Andals, for some mad reason, believed as an article of their faith that slavery was not just wrong but an abomination, and that those who owned slaves were enemies to be killed on sight.

Jace was not naturally a man of blood, and he shared the mild disdain for such men common among the bourgeoisie and aristocrats of the Free Cities, but he would certainly fight to the death to protect his home, his parents, and his sisters.
So he walked forward with six thousand other young Myrmens into the shallow valley that separated the Army of Myr from the Sunset Company. The crossbow in his hands with its iron cranequin was heavy and clumsy, the quiver with its sixty bolts bounced annoyingly against his hip, the short falchion on his other hip threatened to entangle his legs and trip him, and the padded vest and round halfhelm that were his only armor did altogether too good a job of capturing the heat of the bright and cloudless day, but he and the other crossbowmen still trotted down the slope in good heart, a few even making jokes about going for a walk. Jace simply focused on walking forward and ignoring the nervousness that was building in his guts about walking towards a large group of armed and dangerous strangers, but he did admit that the scattered jokes helped to settle his stomach.

“Steady now, boys,” the sergeant called reassuringly. “Don’t get ahead of yourselves, keep in ranks. Just stay together now.”

The crossbowmen continued to advance, drawing steadily away from their own army. They were still almost a hundred yards out of range when there was a ripple of motion along the far ridge.

“Steady, boys,” the sergeant called, an edge of tension in his voice now. “Stay steady, those are just their archers, nothing to worry about.” Jace would have begged to differ, but knew better than to try and contradict the sergeant.

There was a further ripple of motion along the far ridge.

“Steady, boys, steady,” the sergeant called, and then there was a noise like a horribly out of tune harp string being plucked very badly, so that the note was flat and blurred, and a line of darkness rose from the far ridge. Jace’s jaw dropped involuntarily; the enemy was shooting at them already?! But they were still dozens of yards out of range! Dammit, it wasn’t fair! Jace suddenly became hideously aware that the turmoil in his belly had intensified. He clenched his jaw to keep from vomiting.

“Steady, boys!” the sergeant yelled, as there was another botched plucking of that mistuned harp string and another line of darkness rose off the ridge. Jace quailed even as his feet bore him forward, almost against his will. The enemy archers were firing again? But their first volley was still in the air! And speeding along, he realized with sudden terrible clarity, straight towards one Jacaegon Valreos, only son of Galaemon and Jaenera Valreos. The turmoil in his guts rose to new heights at the thought of iron-tipped wood raining down on his personal, precious, and irreplaceable head, with only a few centimeters of iron to keep arrowheads out of his skull.

Jace suddenly wanted, very badly indeed, to be back at home; preferably at the Dancing Doe with a glass of good wine and the best girl in the house all to himself for the whole night. Although he would settle for being set to counting inventory in his great-uncle’s largest warehouse all by himself. Anything to get away from the iron rain that was hissing down towards him.

“Take it like men, boys!” the sergeant roared, and the arrows hit.

There were, in total, two thousand eight hundred and seven archers standing under the Sunset Company’s banner that day on the field of Tara. Each of them drew a longbow of yew or ash or elm, the lightest of which had a draw-weight of ninety-five pounds and could outrange the Myrish crossbows by about a hundred yards. These men were every bit as highly-trained experts, in their way, as the company’s knights were; as the saying went, ‘To make a good archer, start with his grandfather’. The true advantage imparted by that training wasn’t just in the power or range of the bows, however.

It was in their rate of fire.
It was generally agreed that in order to be useful on the battlefield, an archer had to be able to loose ten arrows in one minute, almost three times the rate of fire that could be expected of a cranequin crossbow such as the Army of Myr used. Two thousand eight hundred and seven archers, firing ten arrows a minute, yielded an arrowstorm numbering twenty-eight thousand and seventy arrows a minute, or four hundred and sixty-eight arrows every second.

In the first minute of the Battle of Tara, the archers of the Sunset Company loosed enough arrows to kill every crossbowman in the Army of Myr almost five times over.

Of course, not all of those arrows hit. Shooting for effect sacrifices accuracy for volume of fire, especially at long range. Almost a third of the arrows hit nothing but dirt. Of the rest, about one in six struck armor or equipment and were either absorbed or deflected away. The rest hit something more vital.

Screams rose up around Jace as the arrows struck home. The man just next to him, who had looked up at the falling arrows, took a shaft plumb in the eyeball and collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut. Another took two arrows through his padded vest and dropped to his knees to choke his life out in bloody gouts. Another fell to ground howling as he tried to squeeze the pain out of his transfixed thigh. Yet another, shot through the groin, seemed to be screaming without pausing to draw breath.

Jace vomited in reaction, and continued to plod forward, hunching his shoulders like a man walking into a high wind, trying to shut out everything but the sergeant, who was now bellowing to make himself heard over the screaming wounded.

The second volley was worse

_The Myrish crossbowmen made it within range of the Sunset Company’s position and even found the courage to loose a volley of their own before they finally broke and ran back to their own lines. Although the men of the Sunset Company, or those who left records, were almost universally contemptuous of the Essosi, the bravery of the Myrish crossbowmen at Tara won respect even from the most chauvinistic Westerosi, while more moderate commentators were more openly admiring. Gerion Lannister, in his diary, ended his account of the Myrish crossbowmen by quoting a passage from a popular chanson of the Conquest of Dorne commenting on Ser Uther Dayne, who was Sword of the Morning during the Conquest; “Such a vassal he might have been, had he served a better lord.”_

Rhaegar watched his crossbowmen streaming back towards the army’s lines and snarled. He should have guessed that the Usurper would make sure to have an abundance of archers. He would have paid dearly to have such men available to him, but the Free Cities didn’t produce military archers any more than they did knights. Any man with the wealth to acquire a bow and the free time to train with it could just as easily buy a crossbow, especially in Myr, where the slave artisans made them by the thousands, and crossbows were much easier to attain proficiency with.

A chill of anticipation settled into his bones as he turned to his Kingsguards. Ser Alliser Thorne and Ser Lothor Brune, their newest members, all but bursting at the seams with fierce pride. Ser Oswell Whent, his normally sardonic grin absent as he returned his king’s gaze. And Ser Arthur Dayne, his closest friend in all the world and his fiercest champion, his dark-blue eyes solemn under the brow of his helmet.

“Gentlemen,” Rhaegar said, “it is time. To your posts.” Ser Alliser and Ser Lothor clanked their gauntleted fists off their breastplates and cantered away to their places at the head of the Myrish spearmen. Ser Oswell and Ser Arthur assumed their positions on either side of Rhaegar, Arthur on his right and Oswell on his left. Rhaegar turned to his trumpeter. “Sound the advance,” he
commanded. The trumpeter nodded, raised his instrument to his lips, and blew, the long rising notes splitting the air. Rhaegar drew his sword and aimed it at the Sunset Company. “Forward!” he shouted, pitching his voice to carry as far as it could. “Forward! Fire and Blood!”

The Army of Myr rolled down the hill, its line quickly becoming uneven as the infantry of the Company of the Cat began to outstrip the Myrish spearmen. Not that the Myrmen were deliberately lagging, with Rhaegar’s loyalists behind them, but the Company of the Cat was more used to maneuvering as a single unit; before now, the Myrmen had only practiced maneuvering in hundred-strong companies. On the right rode the five hundred horsemen of the Stormcrows, led by their three captains; Sallor the Bald with his twisting scar warped by his pensive frown, Prendahl na Ghezn, whose broad face was as composed as a king riding to council, and Daario Naharis twisting his gold-painted mustachios between his gauntleted fingers. On the left flank rode the Long Lances, eight hundred of the best lancers in Essos although they were more lightly-armored than the Andal knights, with their homely captain Gylo Rhegan at their head. Behind the front line rode the cavalry of the Company of the Cat led by the bulky figure of their captain Bloodbeard, his famous red beard bristling over his breastplate, and Rhaegar’s loyalists, the lean figure of their black-armored king at their head flanked by his Kingsguards.

As they marched down the slope and into the valley, absorbing the retreating crossbowmen as they go, they entered the zone where the Sunset Company’s archers shot the crossbowmen to ribbons. The arrows rise and fall again, but the Myrmen and the sellswords raised shields and plodded on; if the Myrmen are unenthusiastic about dying far from home at the hands of angry strangers, they know that to retreat without orders is to die, and their shields are protecting them well enough to let them continue. As for the sellsword infantry, they have walked through fields of dying men before, and faced downpours of steel rain before; to take the punishment and march on was their work and their pride.

XXX

Sarra’s Will, an archer from the Reach, cursed as his questing fingers found nothing but an empty quiver. “I’m out,” he said to the man behind him as he unstrung his bow. “Your turn, ser knight, and best of luck to you.” Ser Basil Graves, whose family owned the village where Will had lived before going for a sellsword, grunted acknowledgement and pushed forward, raising his poleaxe so that the butt-spike was presented forward and the spike-backed hammer head that could break a man’s skull through the helmet was cocked back behind his left ear. Will squeezed back through the line, passing Ser Andrey’s squire and a spearman from Bitterbridge who was muttering prayers under his breath before reaching the rear, where he reached back over his left shoulder and drew a maul out of its carrying loops. A maul was quite crude as weapons went, being essentially a steel hammerhead mounted on a four-foot haft, but with an archer’s huge strength behind it, it could batter a knight to flinders. Will braced his shoulder against the spearman’s back, said a prayer, and waited for the impact.

All along the line, the scene was repeated; the archers ran out of arrows and fell back through the lines, while the knights and men-at-arms pushed forward to from the front with their squires and the infantry just behind them. The Stormlanders and the footmen of the North held the left, while the Valemen and the infantry of the Westerlands stood on the right. On the left wing was the cavalry of the North, Eddard Stark at their head with a predatory look in his eyes at the sight of the dragon banners. On the right wing stood the knights and the men-at-arms of the Westerlands, with Jaime Lannister in the front rank with the great bulk of Gregor Clegane at his left hand. In the rear waited the Riverlanders and the Ironborn, waiting for the command from Brynden Tully that would send them into the fray. The front rank was studded with the champions of the Sunset Company. Leobald Tallhart, Maege Mormont and her daughter Dacey, and Greatjon Umber stood at the head of the Northmen. Ser Clifford Swann, saturnine Ser Brus Buckler, and Ser Willam
‘Silveraxe’ Fell with his famous axe led the Stormlanders, while Robert Baratheon stood at the center of the line. In the front rank of the Valemen stood Ser Eustace Hunter, Ser Lyn Corbray, and gravely elegant Ser Mychel Egen, while at the head of the Westermen were Ser Lyle Crakehall, Ser Tygett Lannister, and broadly mustachioed Ser Elys Westerling.

These men were some of the deadliest slayers in the world, both individually and collectively. They had been sidetracked by the conquest of Pentos, but now their enemy was before them. The oaths of vengeance they had taken back in Westeros burned in their minds at the sight of the dragon banners, and even the Westermen, who cared little for the rights and wrongs of the matter, became infected with the wrath that was spreading through the Company. Already the Northmen were chanting “Charge! Charge!” and the Northern horse and the Western knights were trotting forward.

Robert Baratheon felt the fury that was his bloodline’s heritage sear through his veins like fire. The man, no, the vermin that had abducted, raped, and murdered his betrothed and dumped her body in the sea like so much garbage was before him. Now, by the gods, he would have his revenge. He raised his great hammer over his head. “AT THEM!” he roared, letting the hammer fall to point at the enemy. “JUSTICE AND VENGEANCE!”

The company roared like a storm breaking on the cliffs of Shipbreaker Bay as they rushed forward.

*The initial clash of the Sunset Company and the Army of Myr was fearsome by all accounts. No less an authority than Ser Brynden Tully, in his memoirs, claimed that the Battle of Tara “was more fiercely fought than any battle I had ever been in before that time, and in all my later experience it was equaled but never surpassed for ferocity.” Septon Jonothor, writing to a colleague in King’s Landing, said “Never have I seen men become possessed of a fury such as they were possessed at Tara. I can only imagine that the Warrior, seeing that we fought against slavers, was moved to assist our arms and lent us his anger.”

Whatever the cause for the ferocity of the combat, the initial clash went in favor of the Sunset Company; on their right the Company of the Cat was stopped dead in their tracks, while on their left the Myrish spearmen were actually driven a short way back down the hillside with Ser Lothor Brune of the Kingsguard being killed at the head of his battle by Ser Brus Buckler. However, the breakthrough was quickly stemmed. Ser Alliser Thorne rallied his battle against the Northmen, killing Leobald Tallhart and pressing his company back some twenty yards according to Maester Alleras’ history of the battle, while Rhaegar himself committed his exiles to the fray. On the other side of the battle, Bloodbeard committed his cavalry to the fight and bogged the Sunset Company’s right into a grinding stalemate.

Fortunately for the Sunset Company, Robert had had the wit to place his reserves under possibly the best commander on the whole field . . .

Brynden Tully reined in beside Victarion Greyjoy. “Your lads ready to go in, Greyjoy?” he asked gruffly.

“Aye, they are,” Victarion replied, running the thumb of his gauntlet along the edge of his axe. “They’ve been desperate for a proper fight since Pentos, haven’t you lads?”

That last was pitched to carry to the nine hundred reavers behind him, who replied with laughter and catcalls, including one fellow who claimed that a good fight wasn’t the only thing he was desperate for and that in his state, even a Myrman would do.

“We come too,” said a guttural voice behind Brynden, who turned to find Akhollo, who he knew vaguely as one of the more prominent freedmen despite not joining the Pioneers, wearing an ill-fitting mail shirt and carrying a sword sloped against his shoulder. And beside him was Maester
Gordon, still in his maester’s robes but with a belligerent expression on his face.

Brynden blinked. “You’re not in the company,” he said finally, knowing even as he said it that the argument sounded lame. “And your people aren’t equipped for a fight like this,” he jerked a thumb towards the battle. “They’ll be massacred.”

Akhollo stepped forward and grasped Brynden’s ankle. “We slaves,” he said, his accent thickening even further. “Then you kill our masters, free us. Now we men.” Akhollo shook Brynden’s ankle, his eyes earnest. “Men fight,” he said sincerely. “Fight for khal, fight for hate, fight for food, fight for gifts. Best fight for freedom. We have sworn, fight for freedom.” Akhollo’s eyes were steely now. “All have sworn,” he said, voice burning with fervor. “We fight, and be free or dead, as stars look down in witness.”

Gordon nodded. “My Pioneers want in, too,” he said, his voice firm. “If you don’t take them in, they’ll go in anyway.”

_Gods of blood and death_, Brynden thought amazedly, _And, realizing, he knew that he could not refuse the freedmen a place in the battle line. But the thought of the freedmen, poorly armed and worse armored, fighting proper soldiers made him quail. He turned to Victarion, almost willing him to object._

“What are you looking at me for?” Victarion demanded. “I heard him. They want to pay the iron price for their freedom, I’m not going to say them nay.” There was an approving murmur from the ranks of the Ironborn, and Dagmer Cleftjaw nodded his grizzled head sagely.

_Gods forgive me_, Brynden thought, turning back to Akhollo. “You wait for the trumpet,” he said, “and then you follow us in. Understand?”

Akhollo nodded. “We fight,” he said. “We kill masters, and free slaves.” He grinned, baring his teeth. “We kill all masters,” he said savagely, “and free all slaves. We pray for it.” He saluted with his sword and trotted back to the freedmen, already roaring what sounded like orders in the Low Valyrian/Dothraki/Common Tongue argot that the freedmen seemed to have adopted as a language. Gordon flicked a finger off his brow in a token salute and dashed away himself, also roaring for his Pioneers.

Brynden shook his head wearily and turned back to Victarion. “On the trumpet,” he reminded him, and cantered back to his Riverlanders.

_While the infantry were slugging it out in the center, two separate cavalry battles were taking place on the flanks. On the right of the Sunset Company, the Western knights under the command of Jaime Lannister repeated their performance at the Battle of Pentos by breaking the Long Lances. On the other flank, the Northern horse under the command of Eddard Stark faced the Stormcrows . . ._

Daario Naharis broke out of the melee, swearing in stupefaction. _What in the hells do they feed cavalrymen across the Narrow Sea_, he asked himself as he brandished his arakh overhead and roared for any Stormcrows to rally to him.

Daario had been a cavalryman for going on eleven years now and in all that time he had only participated in three massed cavalry fights. Most campaigns were taken up in maneuvers, largely focusing on raiding the other side’s territory while protecting one’s own; battles were such chancy things that most captains avoided them except in extremity. The company received as much pay whether they lost half their men or none at all, and sellswords appreciated a captain who didn’t waste their blood. Dead men didn’t get to enjoy their pay, after all.
The role of cavalry in such operations was taken up primarily with reconnaissance during the maneuvers and sparring on the flanks of the armies in the rare battles. These conflicts could get bloody, certainly, and the quicksilver slash-and-run war between two armies’ outriders had the potential to become gruesome especially between companies that hated each other, but the need for massed combat rarely arose. Of the three such battles that Daario had fought in, only one had arisen by design, during a particularly nasty border war between Volantis and Norvos; the other two had happened by accident, when the Stormcrows, maneuvering in a body, had stumbled across another company and no one had had time to call matters off before the first blood was shed.

Apparently no one had told these Andal horsemen the rules, though. Instead of darting back and forth and exchanging sallies of small parties with the Stormcrows, they had all rolled forward in a solid mass, knee to armored knee, apparently dead-set on colliding with the company at full speed. Thank the gods that Sallor and Prendahl had seen that the only thing to do was meet the charge with one of their own; Daario didn’t want to think what taking that charge at the standstill would have been like. The melee that had followed the impact was more terrible than anything Daario cared to remember; howling Andals coming out of the dust waving swords or axes or spiked maces and nothing to do but block, cut back, and ride on, trying desperately to see in ten directions at once while the screams of men and horses filled the air.

Daario knew himself to be a brave man; where other men trembled at the prospect of a fight he felt elated. But the thought of diving back into that swirling, snarling brawl frightened him.

Ruthlessly he drove the fear from his mind. The company was in that mess. And the first law of the sellsword was that you didn’t run out on your company. Daario howled encouragement to the handful of Stormcrows that had rallied to his side, raked back his spurs, and plunged into the maelstrom.

The Northern cavalry eventually broke the Stormcrows, but a remnant retreated in good order under the command of Daario Naharis, who with the deaths of his co-captains Sallor the Bald and Prendahl na Ghezn was the senior surviving officer of the Stormcrows. Despite his victory, Eddard faced some difficulty in reforming his horsemen, as casualties had to be carried off and the squadrons reformed.

In the center, the battle was only intensifying . . .

Ever after, the men who fought in the center at the Battle of Tara would remember it for its noise. The clamor of metal on metal, the drumming of horse’s hooves, the shouts and trumpet calls of orders attempting to get through the clangor, but most of all the screams. Screaming men and screaming horses, their flesh torn and their bones broken, filled the air. More than one veteran would later claim that they could tell how a man was wounded by the way he screamed, but such differences were lost in the cacophony of the battle.

It was into this maelstrom of noise that Rhaegar Targaryen committed his reserves, his loyalists on his right and the horse of the Company of the Cat on his left. The effect was akin to bouncers plunging into a tavern brawl. Slowly, little by little, the Sunset Company was pressed back by the weight of metal and flesh that crashed into the fray. The Northmen, rallied by Maege Mormont and the towering Greatjon, closed ranks and refused to budge, and the Westermen on the other flank locked shields and stood fast under the leadership of Tygett Lannister, but in the center the Valemen, the Stormlanders, and the Reachmen slowly gave ground. Ser Clifford Swann died there when Ser Alliser Thorne rammed his sword through the marcher knight’s visor and face into his brain. Rhaegar Targaryen, who for all his faults was not a coward, slew Ser Basil Graves with a downward cut that knocked the Reacher to his knees and under his destrier’s hooves where he was trampled to death. Bloodbeard of the Company of the Cat slew five of the best knights of the Vale
in succession as he pushed forward, laughing uproariously with the battle-joy. A breakthrough seemed imminent.

At that moment a trumpet screamed the charge, and the reserves of the Sunset Company entered the fray. On the right the Ironborn advanced, chanting a battle-song in a tongue that was old before the first Andal set foot in Westeros as Victarion Greyjoy threw his axe in the air to spin end over end in a blur of wood and steel before plucking it out of the air. On the left, Ser Brynden Tully led the Riverlanders in a dismounted charge that carried the Northmen forward with them and turned the Myrish right from a relatively orderly formation to a struggling mass. And in the center, with a tigerish roar of “Free or dead!” the freedmen dived into the fray.

The freedmen were only lightly armored in scavenged mail and brigandines, and their weapons ranged from spears and shields taken from the dead to bare hands. They were poorly drilled, and even the Pioneers, the best-trained men among them, were in no kind of formation. But between them they had more than ten thousand years’ worth of bottled-up slights and humiliations and injuries to avenge, and the primal hatred of the slave for the slave-owner consumed them. So when the freedmen plunged into the center, they hit with the force of a cavalry charge and stopped the advance of Rhaegar’s army dead in its tracks. Ser Gyles Rosby was dragged from his horse by a Pioneer with a pick and beaten to a paste by the rest of his dismounter’s squad. A freedman clinging to his sword arm undid Ser Jaremy Rykker, who flung the man to the ground and ran him through the belly in the time it would have taken him to dodge Robert Baratheon’s great hammer. The remaining Myrish spearmen fought desperately and built a low berm of dead freedmen before their shield-wall, but the tide of freedmen submerged them.

Now all semblance of orderly lines and closed ranks was swept away and combatants from both armies were intermingled. Ser Alliser Thorne struck down three Riverlander spearmen in quick succession and then fell himself as Dacey Mormont’s mace collapsed the back of his helmet. The verses of The Seven-Pointed Star filigreed across Ser Guncer Sunglass’s breastplate failed to protect him against the Greatjon’s massive blade and the pious lord of Sweetport Sound fell to the roaring Northman’s greatsword. Lyn Corbray and Bloodbeard were twice swept together and swept apart by the tides of struggling men and horses before a third engagement ended with Lyn’s dagger buried in the sellsword captain’s visor slit. Ser Tygett Lannister stood over the body of Akhollo, who had been stunned by a spear-shaft across the head, and died when a Cat’s axe cut through his gorget. Ser Elys Westerling was clubbed down and beaten into red ruin by a squad of Cats with mauls.

But the most important combat occurred when Robert Baratheon, roaring his battle-fury to the skies, met Rhaegar Targaryen in close combat while his household men occupied the Kingsguards. The singers tell that the Great Stag’s first blow slew the Exile Prince’s horse, so that Rhaegar fell to the ground. They also tell that Robert and Rhaegar stood toe-to-toe for nigh on half an hour trading blows, but that is false. In reality, the storied duel lasted a handful of heartbeats. Rhaegar lunged, aiming for the seams in Robert’s fauld, but he was foiled by a rising parry that sent the point of his sword scraping across Robert’s breastplate. Robert, wielding his hammer two-handed, rammed the butt of his hammer into Rhaegar’s visor to force him back, and then swung for Rhaegar’s head. Rhaegar raised his sword and ducked, but not strongly enough and not far enough and the hammerblow clipped him over the top of his helmet, sending him sprawling.

Rhaegar would certainly have died there, for Robert was even then raising his hammer to finish him off, but for the valor of his Kingsguards, who broke away from Robert’s men. Ser Oswell Whent flung himself from his horse and tackled Robert to the ground, distracting him entirely while Ser Arthur Dayne dragged his king’s unconscious body onto his horse. Ser Oswell died moments later when Robert crushed his helm under his hammer, but he had bought the time Ser Arthur Dayne needed to sound the retreat. Long training served the exiles well as they cut their
way out of the melee and regrouped around the Sword of the Morning, who began to lead them out of the battle and leave the sellswords and the Myrish to their fates.

After those Targaryen loyalists who could make their way out of the melee did so, Ser Arthur Dayne immediately ordered a full retreat to Myr. By this time, Eddard Stark and Jaime Lannister had managed to regroup their respective horsemen after breaking the Stormcrows and the Long Lances, and they quickly set out in pursuit.

The running battle that ensued would eventually enter into the hagiographies of both the Sunset Company and the Exile Prince . . .

“Reform! Reform!” Eddard chanted as the Western knights and the Northern men-at-arms eddied around him. The last counter-charge that Ser Arthur Dayne had led against them had broken their cohesion and he and Ser Jaime had to spend valuable minutes rallying them back into ranks.

Rhaegar was getting away, Gods curse him! Eddard and Jaime had pursued the exiles for at least four miles now, snapping at their column’s heels like wolves at an elk, but the Sword of the Morning was as war-wise as he was valiant and not only was he holding the column together, but he was steadily pulling it away from the pursuit. Eddard snarled, roaring at his cavalry to get themselves in order. The man whose madness had killed his father, murdered his sister, crippled his brother, and exiled him from the North was so close that Eddard could almost feel the murderer’s throat under his fingers, but mile by mile he was slipping out of Eddard’s grasp.

At last the Northern riders reformed their ranks, Arnolf Karstark waving his axe from the head of his wing and Ser Wendel Manderly brandishing his sword at the head of his four remaining knights. The exiles were dying, but they were paving their road to the Seven Hells with the corpses of good men.

A quick glance over towards the Westermen showed that Jaime had rallied his knights into a formation and was gesturing readiness to attack; Eddard raised his sword and lowered it towards the column sheltering the man he hated more than any other in the world. “Advance!!” he bellowed, and the knights of the West and the horsemen of the North spurred their already foaming horses to a clumsy trot. Eddard knew that he was killing the horses of a good third of the company’s cavalry, but the effort had to be made.

As the company’s cavalry closed to within a hundred and fifty yards of the exiles a trumpeter sounded his instrument and the thin rank of infantry parted to make way for a column of knights, led by a figure whose white cloak and armor were liberally spattered with gore. Eddard’s lip curled to bare his teeth behind his visor. He had admired Ser Arthur Dayne; what young man of his age had not? But the man had helped Rhaegar Targaryen kidnap and rape his sister and so he had to die. What was more, for him to continue in the service of a madman brought shame upon his knighthood and dishonored his house; or so Eddard had heard the few Reacher knights who had joined them say, and he presumed that they knew what they were talking about. For him the mere fact that Dayne served the Targaryen was reason enough for deadly feud.

The exile knights shook out from column into line and trotted forward; they had no lances left, but each of them had a sword, axe, mace, or war hammer in his fist and slanted back to rest against his pauldron. Eddard growled to himself, stood in his stirrups, and raised his sword. “CHARGE!” he bellowed, leaning forward and spurring his horse into a canter. “LYANNA!”

“LYANNA!” the Northern horsemen howled back as they spurred their horses forward into a careening charge, heedless of the fact that their horses were foaming their lungs out. Beside them the Westermen charged as well, so that the world was full of the thunder of hooves, and then the
two bodies of cavalry collided.

And as the exile knights and his Northmen savaged each other, Eddard Stark learned first-hand why Ser Arthur Dayne was a legend.

The Sword of the Morning’s first blow shook Eddard’s shield and drove it back into his shoulder. The second, flowing out of the first like a snake twisting through grass, skidded off the crown of Eddard’s basinet with enough force to make his ears ring. Eddard managed to hurl a blow with his broad-bladed arming sword, but Dayne’s own arming sword (Dawn, too long and too heavy to be wielded with one hand, was strapped to his back) slapped it aside and the counter-cut that he launched at Eddard’s visor cut through the soft iron rim of Eddard’s shield and bit into the wood beneath. With a strength that was all the more terrifying for being so casual the Sword of the Morning jerked his blade free and brought around in a cut that cracked Eddard’s shield across and nearly broke his arm through the vambrace. Eddard launched a desperate thrust at the facial slot in Dayne’s barbute helm, but a combination dodge and cross-parry knocked Eddard’s sword off-line and the return cut dented Eddard’s basinet and knocked him half out of the saddle. The whole series of blows took no longer than forty-five seconds.

Eddard would have died there, if Dayne had not been entirely distracted by Jaime Lannister ramming his horse into Dayne’s and launching a thrust at his face.

Ser Arthur managed to slap the thrust aside and bring his horse back under control, but the Young Lion pressed him hard for a long series of seconds, enough for Eddard to reseat himself and shake some of the stars out his eyes. By the time Ser Arthur managed to interrupt Jaime’s rain of blows, Eddard was on his other side and hammering away at him.

Any man but Arthur Dayne would have died there, beset on two sides by experienced foes, but Arthur Dayne had not earned his title and his white cloak by virtue of his name alone. Coolly he parried the storm of swords until he saw an opening. Quick as a frog’s tongue taking a fly, his sword licked out and opened the neck of Jaime’s horse, which collapsed away and died. Without pausing for an instant, knowing that his blow had struck home, Dayne turned in the saddle and threw a thrust at Eddard’s visor, disregarding the fact that Eddard’s arming sword was descending on his left wrist.

The point of Dayne’s arming sword, forged narrow and sharp as a bodkin for exactly this purpose, tore through one of the breathing-slits in the bottom of Eddard’s visor and gouged a furrow down his cheek even as Eddard’s arming sword (like most Northern weapons a generation or two behind their Southron counterparts and so broader in the blade and with a less acute point) struck Dayne’s left wrist and broke it through the gauntlet. In the next instant, with Eddard reeling away in pain and shock and Dayne ripping his sword free of Eddard’s visor, Jaime hurdles his dead horse, half-swording his blade, and rammed the point of his sword through the leaf-mail skirt protecting Dayne’s hip. A frantic blow downwards and to the right left a long dent in Lannister’s sallet helm and hammered him to his knees, but Dayne knew it was time to leave. He had done all he could for his king; he just had to hope it was enough. “Fall back!” he shouted hoarsely, waving his sword in a circle above his head. “Fall back!”

Eddard knocked his visor upward, spraying blood from his torn cheek. He saw Arthur Dayne turn his back and put the spurs to his horse, but to no avail. With a despairing neigh his horse foundered, with only horseman’s reflexes getting Eddard clear of the saddle and saving him from a broken leg. As Eddard staggered up and looked around, what he saw made him curse the gods. The Western knights and the Northern cavalry were in little better state than he and Jaime; from what he could see barely two-thirds of the men they had started the pursuit with were still mounted and fit to fight and all of them looked as blown as their horses. As he watched Ser Wendel Manderley
slumped over the neck of his horse and slid to the ground, utterly exhausted.

And across the field the exiles were getting away! Rhaegar was getting away! Eddard shook his sword and raged almost incoherently, but he knew he could do nothing more. In the final paroxysm of his rage he rammed his sword into the earth and, scowling, called an end to the pursuit. He managed to turn around and walk about ten feet before the battle-rage drained out of him and his legs collapsed underneath him, putting him face down in the churned earth.

The Battle of Tara is an interesting case. Tactically and operationally, it was a crushing victory, destroying Myr’s primary field army and incapacitating its best commander for the foreseeable future. Strategically, however, the honors were more nearly even. Rhaegar Targaryen may have been wounded, but he still lived, thus keeping victory as far out of the Sunset Company’s reach after the battle as it had been before. Furthermore, the Sunset Company had suffered significant casualties. Leobald Tallhart, Ser Clifford Swann, Ser Tygett Lannister, Ser Elys Westerling, and a score of other knights and minor lords were killed in the battle, while the running battle of the pursuit claimed the lives of Ethan Glover, Ser Mark Ryswell, Ser Rupert Brax, and fully a quarter of the Western knights and Northern cavalymen, as well as many of their horses. In addition to the aristocrats, almost five hundred of the Westerosi infantry were killed outright, as were about three times as many freedmen. The number of wounded who later died of their injuries is probably comparable to those who died in the heat of the action.

But if the Sunset Company’s casualties had been significant, the exiles’ losses had been devastating. Oswell Whent, Alliser Thorne, Jaremy Rykker, Lothor Brune, Ardrian Celtigar, Guncer Sunglass, and Gyles Rosby were all killed in the battle or the pursuit, as well as one in three of the other knights and lords among the exiles and many of their infantrymen. Some of these men were not killed during the actual fighting, but had simply fallen behind during the retreat. As they were unable to pay ransom, even if the Sunset Company were willing to take them prisoner, they were killed out of hand. In a single campaign, Rhaegar Targaryen’s reputation in Myr was badly dented and his army all but crippled, while the repute of the Sunset Company soared to new heights.

The consequences arose soon after . . .

- Chasing Dragons: The Sunset Company Reexamined by Maester Hendricus, published 1539 AC
Marching On

Eddard strode into Robert’s tent to find Robert sitting in a chair naked to the waist with a similarly half-naked woman sitting on his lap and the pair of them kissing deeply. Eddard paused for a moment and then cleared his voice emphatically; this was not the first time he had had to interrupt Robert in the midst of a revel.

Robert broke free of his woman’s lips and cast a jaundiced look at his foster-brother. “Do you mind?” he said in an oddly hushed voice. “Only I’m somewhat occupied, as you might have noticed.” The woman sitting on his lap giggled.

Eddard returned Robert’s look with a patient stare. “I’m afraid it can’t wait,” he replied. “And it’s the sort of thing that needs your undivided attention.” He flicked a glance at the woman.

Robert sighed gustily. “Alright then, if you insist,” he said sullenly, pushing the woman off his lap. “Perhaps tonight, love,” he said to the woman with a kiss to the inside of her wrist. The woman sighed, threw on a shirt and swept a robe around herself, and swept past Eddard with a brief, scorching look. Eddard turned to watch her go, and then turned back to Robert and raised an eyebrow. “I swore revenge, Ned, not chastity,” Robert said defensively. “If it makes you feel any better, Alaesa’s the only woman I’ve had since Pentos.” He sighed. “Whatever you do, please don’t shout,” he begged. “That bloody bat tackled me from horseback and hit my helmet with his; I have the most ungodly headache.”

Eddard blinked, and then threw his head back and laughed as he hadn’t laughed since the company sailed from King’s Landing. “You, restrict yourself to only one woman?” he demanded jokingly between chortles. “Pull the other leg, there’s bells on it. Or do you think I’ve forgotten how you had one woman in the Eyrie, one in the Bloody Gate, one in Gulltown, and one in Runestone, all thinking they were the only woman in your life?”

Robert winced and held his hands to his head. “Weren’t those the days,” he said with a wan smile. “But it’s true. Ask young Dick Horpe if you don’t believe your own foster-brother.”

Eddard tilted his head and put a quizzical expression on his face. “Are you feeling quite well?” he said. “This is the east, after all; you never know what strange diseases you might catch.”

“Only disease I’ve caught is something chivalric,” Robert said, putting a shirt on over his heavily muscled torso and motioning Eddard to a chair. “Have I told you about this one pleasure school my lads found when we were conquering Pentos?”

Eddard shook his head. “I did hear about it from the Greatjon, who heard from Ser Brus Buckler,” he said. “According to him it was . . . bad.”

“Bad enough that three or four of the women we pulled out of that bloody hole killed themselves afterwards,” Robert said morosely. “Couldn’t live with what had happened to them.” He sat down again, his normally open face somber. “After that,” he continued, “I couldn’t help but think how many of the whores I’ve had went through something like that. Didn’t help when I found out that about one in three of them had been kidnapped.” Like Lyanna hung in the air unsaid. “So I kept
myself to myself, until Alaesa jumped into my bed and said a liberator deserved to be rewarded appropriately.” He shrugged. “She’s nice,” he said. “Not just in bed, either. We talk.”

Eddard blinked. Robert hadn’t been the sort to get introspective with his women; the order of the day had been wine, song, and pleasure. “What do you talk about?” he asked curiously.

“Why we’re here,” Robert said, pouring wine for them both. “Why we want Rhaegar’s head on a plate. What we plan to do after we’ve gotten it. What that might mean for everyone else.” Robert looked up at Eddard. “Alaesa was born into slavery, she said. Her mother was a housekeeper, her father could be any one of about five or six men including their master and all his sons. She ended up here when her master gave her as a gift to a guest who complimented her; some magister or other from Ceralia. She never got to properly say goodbye to her mother.” Robert’s face was set. “If nothing else, what we’re doing here will put a stop to that, by the gods.”

Eddard nodded. “We’ve made a decent start, anyway,” he said. “Ceralia has fallen.”


“As soon as Lyn Corbray showed up at the gates with the news that we had won here,” Eddard answered with a nod. “The slaves revolted that night, and Lyn woke up to see half the city in flames and the Governor’s guards fighting the slaves for the other half. So he had the Pioneers with him break down the gates and pitched in. He sent word of his victory and the Governor of the North’s head in a bag.”

“Good for Lyn,” Robert said, his voice filled with satisfaction. “We get any volunteers from the slaves in Ceralia?”

“Lyn also sent back four hundred and twenty-nine fit men of military age who’ve taken the star,” Eddard replied. “Some from Ceralia, others from the surrounding countryside. They’ve been mustered in and taken in hand.”

“I wish the Blackfish joy of them,” Robert said, drinking deep. “Did Lyn happen to say whether there was anything left of Ceralia but a pile of ash?”

“His message didn’t say one way or the other,” Eddard said with a sip of his wine. “Either way, we can’t linger too long. We need to strike while the iron’s hot and put Rhaegar in the ground or on a gibbet for good.”

“That eager to cross swords with Ser Arthur Dayne again, Ned?” Robert asked with a crooked smile. “Last time didn’t go so well for you.”

Eddard brushed a finger against the line of stitches along his cheek. “With the gods’ help, I can handle Ser Arthur Dayne,” he said, disregarding the chill that ran down his spine at the memory of that blend of lightning speed and massive strength.

“Not without improving your sword-craft, you can’t,” Robert said seriously. “Ned, you’re as much my brother as Stannis is; more so in most ways. I won’t have you die because you weren’t enough of a swordsman to tackle Ser Arthur Dayne. You’re good, but you’re not a master. Become one; that’s an order from your Captain-General.”

Eddard nodded formally. “As you command, my lord,” he said. Straightening, he went on. “If we can get those of our wounded too wounded to march or fight effectively under roofs in Ceralia, we should be able to march on Myr within a few days; Septon Jonothor tells me that his men are down to the last few-score bodies to bury. After that, we should be able to march to Myr in a sennight or
so, depending on how well the freedmen shake down on the march. Ser Brynden’s scavenged as much armor and as many weapons as he can from the battlefield; we actually have enough for every man to have at least a gambeson and a weapon of some kind. As far as actual formations goes, the freedmen can make up about eighteen hundred spearmen and twenty-three hundred crossbowmen; the crossbowmen only have about ten bolts apiece, though. We’ve got three sennights’ worth of food on hand, and two sennights’ forage.”

Robert winced. “Only two?” he asked. Forage was essential if they were to keep their horses in fit condition to fight. Military horses ate a lot; to stay in prime condition, at least part of their diet had to be grain or oats as well. Simple grass wouldn’t cut it.

Eddard shrugged. “We’d have less if we hadn’t lost so many horses during the pursuit,” he pointed out. “We can stretch it a little if we restrict the draught animals to grazing, but that has its own problems.” Grazing didn’t just take time; it took space as well, unless you wanted to replace the grass with mud. “Forbye, only about one in four of the Northern horse and the Western knights will be able to fight a-horse until we get remounts. I confess to be at a loss as to how we’ll acquire those except by natural increase.”

Destriers and coursers were, for the most part, very specialized animals; destriers literally had no other purpose than to carry an armored knight into battle. Not only were they bred to the task, they were also trained to it, so that a knight’s warhorse was as dangerous an opponent as the knight was. As such, destriers and coursers of the sort that knights required only tended to be produced in regions that produced knights or similar armored horsemen. Essos made fine horses, but they weren’t trained or bred to carry a knight into battle. Even Dothraki chargers, the finest horses in the East, would not necessarily suffice as a knight’s steed.

“That can wait until after we take Myr,” Robert said finally. “Not like cavalry will be much use in a siege, anyway, unless you can find a horse that can leap a city wall.” He sat back in his chair. “How’s Ser Brynden doing with the freedmen?”

Eddard smiled. “Do you know, I really think he’s enjoying himself.”

XXX

“Left, left-right-left! Oh for fuck’s sake Company, halt!” The sergeant in charge of drilling this particular lot of freedmen darted into the marching phalanx and grabbed a freedman in the second rank by the shoulders. “For gods’ sake, man, do you not know your right from your left?!” he roared in the man’s face.

The freedman stared at him with a look of mild terror. “No, lord,” he finally choked out.

The sergeant blinked, and then leaned to one side to face the phalanx in general. “Who else doesn’t know their right from their left?” he demanded, and felt his heart sink to see how many hands went up. “Warrior’s hairy balls,” he said softly to himself, turning back to the freedman he was still holding by the shoulders. “This is your front,” he yelled, buffeting the freedman on the chest, “and this is your rear!” buffeting him on the back. Looking down at the freedman’s feet, he continued with “this is your right,” stomping (lightly) on the freedman’s toes, “and this is your left! Teach your mates tonight!” Stepping back out of the ranks, the sergeant swept the freedmen with a hawk-like stare. “If you can’t march, you can’t keep formation!” he roared. “If you can’t keep formation, you can’t fight! If you can’t fight, then you die! So you will learn to march, in step! Company! Forward, march! Left, left, left-right-left!”

Sitting on his horse at the edge of the drill field just outside the main encampment, Brynden grinned as he watched the sergeant march his freedmen around the circuit of the field, seeming to
propel them along by sheer lung-power. He remembered having to learn to keep formation on horseback, with a scarred old knight who had fought in the Blackfyre Rebellion roaring at him to “keep yer bloody horse in hand there, Tully, and dinnae let him go wanderin’ over all creation!” That knight was long years dead now, having fallen off his horse after a long night’s reveling at The Slippery Fish and broken his neck, but Brynden knew that he was nodding approval from the Warrior’s halls. This was how one made a group of individuals into an army.

There were currently three companies of freedmen marching around the drill field, getting the hang of marching in step. Two more companies, faster learners, were learning to maneuver on one half of the field. One was doing a credible job of “on center right wheel”, while another was making a dreadful hash of “from column form line by sections from the right”; their sergeant was purple in the face and swearing fantastically as he waded into the mess to sort them out. The other half of the field was a forest of pells, man-high wooden posts at which freedmen were practicing with sword and spear. Some were simply swinging or thrusting by rote, others were bobbing and weaving around the post, cutting and thrusting enthusiastically. Sergeants roamed through the pells, roaring out corrections and encouragement richly flavored with profanity.

In short, the freedmen were becoming soldiers. It was taking a lot of time and work, and there were more than a few sprains, broken bones, and lacerations among the freedmen and a few cases of strained vocal cords and one near-aneurysm among the sergeants, but give it another few months and Brynden would take them against any comparable force of infantry in the east. Because they wanted to kill.

Brynden had been a knight long enough to know that the common man’s capacity for violence was rather limited. Most men, faced with a situation that demands that they confront a complete stranger, will restrict themselves to shouting and gesticulation, with maybe a punch or two thrown if they were extremely upset. If they were inebriated, then more punches would be thrown, and maybe the knives would come out if the stranger was a horse-coper or a foreigner or a Dornishman or belonged to some other group that people distrusted or despised on principle, but even then outright murder was rare. As a general rule, the ability to kill a complete stranger in cold blood was a talent so rare that it had to be instilled by rigorous training; that level of training was what set knights and men-at-arms apart from the common run of men.

The freedmen, however, had no such qualms when it came to slavers; they had proved as much at Tara. What they really needed to learn was how to do it properly. Almost half of the freedmen who had fought at Tara had been killed or mortally wounded, and many others had been wounded badly enough that they could no longer march or fight. Simple fanaticism wasn’t enough; if the freedmen wanted to have their revenge, they would have to become soldiers.

Brynden just hoped that the new volunteers would learn quickly. Robert had given orders that the company was to march for Myr city by the end of the sennight.

XXX

Ser Arthur Dayne glanced up as the door opened; it was not yet meal-time and he had given strict orders that the king was not to be disturbed. His hand tightened on the hilt of the sword lying across his lap and his legs curled underneath his chair but before he sprang into action he recognized Magister Rahtheon, the king’s good-father.

“How come you here?” he asked almost rudely; the pain in his splinted wrist and bandaged thigh made him short-tempered and he distinctly remembered telling Barristan that Rahtheon was not to be admitted.

“My daughter prevailed upon Ser Barristan to let me in,” Rahtheon said in his smooth voice that
put Arthur in mind of a hedge-maester such as had visited the town at the foot of Starfall castle. “How is the king?”

It was the simple concern in the magister’s voice that kept Arthur from telling him it was not his concern. He turned towards the bed. “Much as you see him,” he said, his voice heavy with repressed sorrow and mastered fear.

Rhaegar Targaryen, uncrowned King of Myr and true King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, lay on the bed, motionless except for the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. His eyes were closed and his hands folded on his chest, but his eyes roamed under their lids and his hands occasionally trembled where they lay. Rhaegar had always been lean, but two sennights on no greater nourishment than thick broth and tea was wasting his muscles. Already his face looked too much like that of a cadaver.

Rahtheon stood silently for a long moment before he turned back to Arthur. “Will he recover?” he asked, the directness of his voice almost entirely masking the tinge of doubt.

Arthur shrugged. “That is in the hands of the gods,” he said hollowly. “But the maesters are not confident. If he would remain awake for more than moments at a time it would be different, but he does not. Blows to the head such as he sustained are chancy things.” Arthur didn’t mention the fact that when Rhaegar did awake he was anything but lucid; mostly he stared blankly at the ceiling but on occasion he ranted incoherently. Arthur feared little, but his king’s condition made his bones seem to chill.

Rahtheon sighed gustily and drew up a stool. “Well, shit,” he said disgustedly. “So much for that idea.” At Arthur’s cocked eyebrow he went on. “The Conclave is scheduled to debate a motion of no confidence in the king’s ability to lead tomorrow,” he explained. “I had hoped that he would be able to forestall the debate by appearing in person, but . . .” he gestured at the supine king.


Rahtheon held up his hands. “If it were up to me, I would stop them in a heartbeat, but it’s not up to me. My faction is only one of four or five on the Conclave and since news of the battle reached us it has quickly become the smallest one. The simple fact, as the Conclave sees it, is that the king is solely at fault for a war that we are currently losing, at a cost of just over six thousand lives and hundreds of thousands of florins in lost and destroyed property. The easiest way to end the war, or so they will say, will be to accede to the Baratheon’s demand that the king be turned over to him.”

Arthur looked up, and Rahtheon quailed at the deadly anger in his eyes. “Let them try, if they dare,” the Sword of the Morning said harshly, his hand tight upon his sword-hilt. “I will festoon the streets of this city with their guts.”

“I doubt it not, ser knight, but can you do as much to the whole city?” Rahtheon asked, mastering the fear that the Andal knight had put in him; he had not restored his family’s fortune and risen to the first rank of the Conclave without learning to keep his countenance in the face of peril. “Your army is destroyed; your own men are reduced to perhaps a half or a third of their former strength. There are almost seventy-five thousand free men and women in this city; do you truly think that you can kill enough of them to cow the rest into obedience before they pull you down? Already my people bring me word that the common people of this city are considering storming this manse and throwing the survivors to the Baratheon in hopes that he will leave the city in peace. I have seen what happens when a bear is faced with a horde of dogs in the fighting pits of Meereen, ser knight, and let me tell you; nine times in ten the bear gets eaten.” Rahtheon spread his hands. “We find ourselves in the position of the bear, ser knight. We can stand and fight, and almost certainly die,
or we can escape and live to fight another day.”

Arthur glared at the magister, passion warring with logic in his brain, and finally leaned back in his chair, his anger dimming as he looked at his prostrate king. “Tell Ser Barristan, on my authority, that he is to make preparations to defend this place against attack,” he said, his voice still hard. “And pass word to Ser Gyles Rambton that he is to hold his ships in instant readiness to sail; if we have to fight our way out of the city, I would rather we not be vexed by lack of stores or suchlike.” He looked back up at the magister. “Do all you can with the Conclave, my lord,” he said seriously. “The future of the kingdom depends on it.”

Rahtheon stood and bowed. “All that my might and craft can do, I shall, for my daughter’s sake and that of my grandchild” he said. At Arthur’s cocked eyebrow he went on. “My daughter has suspected for the past moon and more that she is pregnant, but in the past sennight she has become certain.” He crossed to Ser Arthur and held out his hand. “Praela is my only heir, ser knight,” he said, his voice deadly serious. “Her brother died in infancy and her mother followed him into the grave from grief. The only hope of my line is in my daughter and the child beneath her heart. Whatever you do to secure the future of House Targaryen, you have my aid, to my last copper and my last breath. The house you swore fealty to is my house now, by the bond between your king and my daughter, and I will not permit it to fail.”

Ser Arthur rose. “Nor shall I,” the Sword of the Morning said grimly. “Not while I have the strength to slay its enemies.” And tucking his sword under his left arm he clasped forearms with the magister as with a brother.

XXX

In close-order formation, each infantryman occupied three square feet of space. A mounted cavalryman occupied twice as much frontage and three times as much depth, because horses are so large. If the eleven hundred cavalry and six thousand, nine hundred infantry of the Sunset Company were arrayed in a single file line, they would stretch almost six miles along the Great North Road that linked Myr city to its northern territories. However, such a single file line would be impractical, to say the least, and so with the fighting men of the company arrayed in column of fours and with flank guards, advance scouts, and rearguard deployed around the column, the fighting men of the Sunset Company were compacted down to just over a full mile of road-space. This, of course, did not include either the baggage train or the great cloud of camp followers that trailed the company like the tail of a comet.

And there were other factors that operated on the length of the column. Every day during the three sennights that the company took to march from Tara and Ceralia to Myr city, parties of cavalrymen and mounted infantrymen left the main body of the company to range on either side of the line of march, seeking the rich estates that lined one of the three best roads in Myr. Guided by former slaves who in some cases had escaped from those same estates only days before, they generally found them, although they struck any estate or farm they happened across; the Sunset Company did not discriminate between targets.

When the estates were found, several things happened. First, any resistance was overcome; overseers, guards, and any men of the house who were foolish enough to hold onto a weapon or make any threatening moves were cut down by veterans of the great battle of Tara, against whom they had about as much chance of victory as a lady’s lapdog would have against a direwolf. Second, every slave still held in bondage was freed in a cacophony of jubilation as every chain was broken and every shackle struck off. Third, the estate or farm was systematically pillaged. This could be a major operation; even the small farms of the few freeholding yeomen of the Myrish countryside were prosperous on a scale rarely seen in Westeros. The fat black earth of the Myrish
heartlands was as fertile as any soil in Westeros, and if Westeros had enjoyed years of peace since the last of the Blackfyre rebellions, it was longer still since grim-visaged War had visited the heartlands of Myr with sword and torch; the fighting between Myr and its sister cities was confined to the borderlands, and while the Dothraki had never heard the story of the goose that laid the golden eggs, they would have instantly recognized the sense behind it. As a result, even the meanest yeoman’s cottage was well-furnished by Westerosi standards, and the barns and granaries were filled with grain; the war had so disrupted the usual system of transport, with Rhaegar’s army requisitioning carts and wagons to carry supplies, that the grain had not been transported to market.

In addition to all the foodstuffs they could carry, the Westerosi swept up any coin or loose valuables they could find; if there were any survivors from the capture of the estate, they were questioned ruthlessly about where their wealth was hidden, often with torture. This, of course, presumed that the newly freed ex-slaves had not killed the survivors already, which they usually did. The officers commanding the raiding parties did their best to prevent any female captives from being raped, on the orders of their Captain-General, but they could not be everywhere at once and many of them simply ignored the screams on the grounds that they had more important things to be getting on with, like organizing transport for the spoils that would feed the company and enrich both their men and the general coffers of the company.

At last, after everything that could be carried away had been stowed and loaded and the freedmen were ready to march, the torches were lit. The cottages of the yeomen were generally spared, although the furniture was almost always smashed, but every manse that received a visit from the Sunset Company’s raiders was burned, either by the raiders themselves or by the freedmen. In bringing freedom and justice to Myr, the Sunset Company left a trail of death and ruin, marked by pillars of smoke from manses put to the torch.

Word of their coming preceded them, as these things do, and many Myrish chose not to await their arrival. Taking whatever valuables and heirlooms they could carry on their backs, their horses, or in a cart, they took to the road and ran for Myr city, constantly looking over their shoulders for the cloud of dust that would herald the outriders of the horde that had descended on them. These refugees, augmented by those who had actually endured the Andals’ visitations and either escaped or been let loose, streamed into Myr city by the hundreds every day, each bearing their own tale of woe and anguish, and their stories mingled and conflated until many-tongued Rumor flew through the city. The Andals were freeing and arming every slave, even the women and children. The Andal priests had declared a holy war against the very institution of slavery, and were urging the utter destruction not just of Myr, but of every Free City that did not immediately free their slaves. The Andals’ chieftain was a stag-headed giant who exulted in rape and slaughter and laughed as he slew; his chief lieutenant was a pelt-wearing barbarian from the farthest northland who ate the hearts of his enemies and could transform into a great man-wolf. The armed slaves had sworn a blood-oath by dark gods that they would not leave a freeborn throat uncut or a freeborn maidenhead untorn when they captured Myr.

The rumors grew ever more fantastic and ever more hysterical as the days passed and the flow of refugees from the countryside continued unabated. The common people of Myr muttered in their taverns and bawdyhouses, the magisters sealed themselves in their manses, priests held forth on street corners about the savagery of the Andals and the judgment of the gods that rode with them, the Conclave debated, the guards on the walls watched for the gleam of sunlight on spearheads that would herald the coming of the enemy, and the slaves whispered in their barracks, laying their own plans against the advent of freedom.
Meanwhile, in Westeros . . .

King's Landing would rejoice at the birth of King Stannis' firstborn son Prince Lyonel, who received the title Prince of Dragonstone, and would quickly gain the additional title of the Black Prince in homage to the Baratheon coloring he inherited from his father.

The event, like the births of all his children, would see displays of largess otherwise unheard of from the king as the coffers of the Red Keep opened to provide food and merriment for the smallfolk of the capital; and even the public works of the crownroads and the reclamation of Rhaenrya's Hill would be halted as public holiday was declared by the Grim Stag.

But the jubilation of the people and king would prove short-lived, as it would be revealed than on the very day of the Black Prince’s birth, Oberyn Martell would declare that his brother Doran’s failure to avenge the murder of their kin and defend the honor of House Nymerios Martell, had forfeited his right to sit as head of their house. As such Prince Oberyn would declare himself the one rightful Prince of Dorne and call for the Dornish to flock to his host; to both install him in Sunspear and restore the independence of the Dornish Principality.

In one audacious move Oberyn Martell would ignite the first fire that would test the fledgling Baratheon Dynasty, and the first of the many wars of Lyonel the Magnificent’s life.

The Red Viper Rebellion had begun . . .

Oberyn Martell mounted his favorite horse and rode to the top of the great dune overlooking his camp. Here, in the great desert between Sandstone and Hellholt, was the true soul of Dorne, and it was here where its truest men lived. Among the host that had answered his call the scorpions of the Qorgyles and the flames of the Ullers were most prominent, along with a bandera of three hundred men from the farming settlements along the banks of the Greenblood under his own banner of the sun-and-spear encircled by the red viper. Around the periphery of the main block of tents were men from the other houses of Dorne; pale mountaineers who had remembered honor, swarthy fishers and shore-dwellers from the coast, and even some townsmen from Planky Town or the shadow town at the base of Sunspear who had acknowledged their true prince.

The trumpets blared for silence and the assembled host before him quieted. Oberyn muttered a quick prayer for eloquence and began to orate. “Cousins,” he began, pitching his voice to be heard even in the back of the host, although there were heralds to repeat his words. “Brothers and sisters of Dorne! Barely a year ago, our beloved princess, Elia of Martell, was savagely and inhumanly murdered along with her children. Men say it is unknown who committed this abominable deed, but all men know who the culprit is! It was Tywin Lannister who gave the command, it was Amory Lorch who stabbed Elia’s daughter Rhaenys half a hundred times, and it was Gregor Clegane whom men call the Mountain who dashed out the brains of Elia’s son Aegon before he raped and strangled her.” There were murmurs through the host, and a few ululated their grief for the slain.

“We know this, as all men with eyes to see and ears to hear know,” Oberyn continued. “And from that day to this, we have demanded justice for our murdered princess and her babes. By the blood wrongfully shed, by the horror visited on our beloved princess, we have demanded the vengeance
that we are owed, by the laws of gods and men. And how have we been answered?” Oberyn allowed some of the anger boiling in his heart to seep into his voice. “Our demands for what we are rightfully due and owed have been met with naught but silence and insult! Tywin the Butcher lolls in Casterly Rock and revels in his wealth and his honors! Gregor the Mountain even now holds a place of honor as the sworn shield of the Butcher’s son and heir! Amory Lorch is accounted as a trusty and well-beloved bannerman of the Butcher! And King Stannis, who owes us justice for our slain, takes the Butcher’s daughter to his bed and calls her his queen, rutting with her in the same apartment where our princess’s daughter was slaughtered!” Boos rose from the crowd, interspersed with cries of “Shame! Shame!” and “To the spears!”

“And while we are so insulted,” Oberyn went on, now in the full grip of his rage, “our so-called prince does nothing! The blood and dishonor of our princess and her children, his own sister and niece and nephew, cries out from the earth for vengeance and he does nothing! He sits in the Tower of the Sun and weeps as a beaten whore weeps, while the ghosts of our defiled princess and her butchered children plead for justice from the Heavens!” Roars of disapproval rose from the host, but to Oberyn’s relief they were all for Doran’s sluggishness. This had been the most dangerous part; Tywin Lannister and his dogs were easy targets, but a ruling Prince less so.

He flung up his hand and the cries of “Shame!” and “Dishonor!” slowly stilled. “A prince who does not protect his people, and fails to avenge their deaths, is not a prince that deserves to rule us,” he declared, his words striking the silence as thrown rocks against a board. *Gods be with me; I cannot turn back now…* He stifled the regret he felt for his brother’s wife, who was blameless in this affair; only with an iron heart could he say what he had to say next. “Here do I declare that Doran Martell the coward is deposed, and that I, Oberyn of the House of Nymeros Martell, trueborn and true son of the line of Nymeria, claim the title and throne of the Prince of Dorne. For my first act, I declare that Dorne withdraws her allegiance from King Stannis, who has ignored our demands for justice. For my second act, I declare war unrelenting on House Lannister.” The swelling roar of acclamation was stilled, barely by his upraised hand. “I declare House Lannister, and all who swear them fealty, to be enemies of Dorne!” he proclaimed. “On the blood of my raped and murdered sister, and the graves of my slaughtered niece and butchered nephew, I swear that I shall give no peace and no mercy to House Lannister. I shall destroy them utterly, unto the last child, lay their castles in ruins, and put to the sword every man, woman, and child who bears the taint of Lannister blood, so that they shall be no more.” Spears were being beaten on shields now, in a growing thunder that Oberyn had to shout over. “This I swear,” he yelled, “with the Gods and all here as my witness! And I summon all true Dornishmen who love their country and the memory of Elia the Fair to my banner! Let all true Dornishmen declare their fealty, or perish with our enemies!”

The thunder of spear on shield rose to a crescendo, and the ululating war cries that had put fear in the armies of the northerners for generations out of mind split the heavens.

*The first target of the rebels was those noble houses that did not declare for Oberyn. Of these, the most prominent was House Yronwood, the most powerful of the Stony Dornish houses and the strongest noble house in all of Dorne after the Martells. Hoping to make a show of force by crushing these overmighty vassals, Oberyn led his forces out of the desert and into the foothills of the eastern Red Mountains, the heart of the Yronwoods’ power. Weakened by desertions to Oberyn’s cause and faced with overwhelming numbers, the Yronwoods were quickly faced with a crisis…*

Anders Yronwood brooded in his solar, glowering down at his family’s lands from the tower window. It was ordinarily a restoring vista, with the stark beauty of the Red Mountains contrasting the fertile upland meadows that produced the bulk of the House’s fighting-tail. On this occasion, however, it was anything but restorative. The columns of smoke rising to the sapphire sky saw to
Damn Oberyn, Anders thought bitterly, damn him to the deepest hell. The Red Viper had murdered his grandfather over the favors of the old man’s paramour, while he was a guest, to boot. Oh, the official story was that Edgar Yronwood’s wounds had festered, but there was no doubt in Anders’ mind whatsoever that Oberyn had fought that duel with a poisoned blade, in blatant contravention of the dictates of chivalry. For the sake of peace, and for the sake of Prince Doran’s regard, he had done his best to put the past behind him; Oberyn had been effectively exiled, after all. But the old imperative, ancient as the mountains, that blood demanded blood, still lurked in his heart.

And then this mad revolt. Anders had been both puzzled and more than a little indignant at Prince Doran’s hesitation in seeking revenge for his sister and her children, but he had been patient. He knew Doran of old; the Prince of Dorne had never bolted his food when he could linger over it, and his mind was a labyrinth of schemes and counter-schemes. So Anders had consoled himself with the thought that whenever Doran did act, it would be well-considered, and the more complete for being thorough. But Oberyn had lost his reason, and as a result the people who looked to Anders for protection were being harried with fire and sword.

And Anders couldn’t do anything to stop it. Even if none of his men had deserted to the Viper’s standard, Yronwood didn’t have the men to face down a host of the size that Oberyn commanded. And all his ravens to Sunspear seeking aid had gone unanswered; for all the good they had done, Anders might as well have eaten them.

There was another he could call on for aid though. The mere thought of it stung Anders’ pride, but his pride would not shield his people. With a final glare at the columns of smoke that hung accusingly in the air, Anders strode away from the window, sat at his desk, and, bile in his throat, began to write.

To His Grace, Stannis, the First of His Name of House Baratheon, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Defender of the Realm, greetings.

As I am sure Your Grace is aware, some three sennights ago Oberyn Martell raised his banners in rebellion, declaring his intent to depose his brother Prince Doran, forswear Dorne’s allegiance to the Iron Throne, and exterminate House Lannister. In this he has been joined by Houses Qorgyle and Uller, their bannermen, and various other forces throughout Dorne. Some, however, have remained loyal to their Prince and their King, and refused to join the revolt. I am proud to declare that my House is first among them. In response to my refusal to forswear my allegiance, the rebel has declared war upon me with the express intention of forcing my submission.

I regret to report to Your Grace that I do not have the power to adequately defend my lands and my people against the rebel. My forces at this time consist in their entirety of one hundred knights, their squires, five hundred light horse, and seven hundred foot, of whom only half are regular men-at-arms. The best intelligence available to me places the rebel’s strength at some three to four thousand men, among whom are some of the best light horse in all of Dorne.

Over the past sennight I have dispatched every raven my maester has trained for Sunspear, pleading for Prince Doran’s aid as is my right under my oath of fealty to him. My repeated pleas have been met only with continued silence. I must perforce conclude that Prince Doran is unable or unwilling to march against the rebel.

Consequently I appeal to Your Grace for justice and protection, trusting that Your Grace will remember your oath to your people to defend them against all their enemies. I pray Your Grace to come to Dorne with sufficient power to suppress the rebel and restore the King’s Peace in Dorne, in aid of which I pledge all the strength available to me. Should Your Grace do this, I shall pledge
my fealty and my homage to Your Grace, to be your true and loyal servant against all Your Grace’s enemies with all my power, for so long as the mountains endure.

I pray Your Grace not take too long in answering this plea; we are in a most desperate case.

I remain, in the meantime, Your Grace’s humble and obedient servant,

Anders Yronwood, the Bloodroyal, Lord of Yronwood, and Warden of the Stone Way

Anders neatly folded the letter, sealed it with his signet ring, and called for his maester. The raven flew north that very evening. Anders spent the rest of the night trying not to think too much about what his forefathers would have thought of him begging for help from a northerner, and a Baratheon descended from the Durrandons at that. He suspected that they wouldn’t be very understanding.

Lord Yronwood’s letter found a receptive ear in King’s Landing. Although the news of the rebellion had come as a shock to King Stannis and his Small Council, the young king proved both resilient and decisive. The marcher houses of the Reach and the Stormlands were immediately ordered onto a war footing, and orders went out for two royal hosts to gather. One, to be comprised primarily of Reachmen and Riverlanders, was to assemble at Highgarden and march down the Prince’s Pass under the command of Mace Tyrell and Randyll Tarly. The other, composed of Stormlanders, Crownlanders, and Valemen, was to assemble at Summerhall and march down the Boneway under Stannis’ personal command. An offer of ten thousand horse and foot by Tywin Lannister was turned down; as Roose Bolton put it, “The Dornish are people to befriend, kill, or leave well enough alone, but never to insult.”

As these hosts would take some time to gather and march to the combat zone, time that the Yronwoods didn’t have to spare, orders swiftly flew to Blackhaven, Grandview, Stonehelm and Crow’s Nest, ordering the Dondarrians, the Grandisons, the Swanns, and the Morrigens to march down the Boneway at best speed and place themselves under Lord Yronwood’s command. This unprecedented move of cooperation went off with surprisingly few hitches, although the combined marcher force did not pursue Oberyn’s forces very aggressively, being content to guard the Yronwood lands and hold the Boneway open until the royal hosts arrived.

A month later, Yronwood hosted another unprecedented event . . .

All his life, Ser Cortnay Penrose had known that the Dornish were the enemy.

According to family legend, the first Penrose had been a scribe who had saved his master’s life from a Dornish assassin. Penrose’s had followed the Storm Kings to war on the Dornish Marches for centuries before the Conquest; after the Conquest they had followed the three-headed dragon of the Targaryens south behind Aegon the Conqueror and Daeron the Young Dragon. As a boy, Cortnay had dreamed of bettering the deeds of his ancestors in those old wars; of forcing the Boneway against the Wyls and the Yronwoods, of sweeping the banks of the Greenblood with sword and torch, of matching wits against raiding war-bands out of the deep deserts under the colors of the Ullers and the Qorgyles, of scaling the walls of Sunspear and storming the Tower of the Sun in the teeth of the Martell spears.

Never in all his days had he ever dreamed that he would be a high officer in a royal army entering Dorne at the invitation of the Dornish.

And yet here he was, the Lord Commander of the royal bodyguard, escorting a king into Dorne who had come at the request of a Dornish lord to fight other Dornish. If his forefathers who had made war on Dorne in those bygone days had lived to see the event, they would have died of
shock. One or two of them might have had the presence of mind to gasp out warnings against
treachery before they expired, but Cortnay doubted it.

Behind them the Dornish half of the Boneway was filled with royal troops. In the center were the
infantry; archers and brigandine-coated spearmen from the Riverlands, mailed spearmen and
archers from the Vale, billmen and archers from the Stormlands, and a block of six hundred
spearmen from the Crownlands in breastplates and open-faced halfhelms under the black stag of
the royal house. At either end of the column were the knights and freeriders of the army, the
Valemen and Riverlanders at the rear and the Stormlanders and the Crownlanders at the front.

Normally, Stannis held a place in the column at the join between the vanguard cavalry and the
infantry, surrounded by the Royal Order of the Storm; Cortnay refused to call it the Stormguard as
some men did, out of a lifelong belief in calling things by their proper names. Today, however,
Stannis had ridden ahead of the army to meet with Lord Yronwood, taking all twenty of the knights
of the Order who had marched with the army with him; the other twelve had stayed in King’s
Landing to protect Queen Cersei and Prince Lyonel. As they neared the castle, Cortnay pursed his
lips at the vista that greeted them; apparently the Red Viper’s raiders had gotten quite close to the
castle before being driven off by the arrival of the marchers who had been dispatched to
Yronwood’s aid. It said much for the rebels’ numbers and prowess that they should so discomfit
the second house of Dorne, inferior only to the Martells.

At the gates of the castle, under the shadow of its frowning towers, there waited a sight that
Cortnay had dreamed of encountering across a stricken field in his youthful days; the Lord of
Yronwood, the most powerful lord in all of Dorne bar one, mounted and armed and surrounded by
his household men with his banner flying; a prize greater than any in Dorne save for a scion of the
Martells, sure to yield gold, honor, and fame to any man who was knight enough to take or slay
him. Cortnay had to remind himself that far from an enemy, Lord Anders was a fellow subject of
the king who had been forced to beg for aid against a foe he could not defeat on his own. In a way
he could almost feel sorry for him; no man liked to be a supplicant, much less a stiff-necked
Dornishman.

As the royal party drew near and reined in, Lord Yronwood dismounted in a clatter of armor.
Handing off his horse to a squire and stepping forward, he slowly bent the knee and bowed his
head, while the knights of his household lowered their lances until the long points touched the
ground in salute. Stannis, still young but already tall and looking almost as regal as Robert had ever
done, also dismounted and walked forward until he stood before the Dornishman. “My lord,” he
said solemnly, “as you have asked, I have come. What would you have of me?”

“Justice, Your Grace,” Lord Yronwood said hoarsely. “Justice for my murdered people, my slain
men, and my devastated lands. Justice and the head of Oberyn Martell, who men call the Red
Viper.”

“Then justice you shall have,” Stannis said, a note of iron sternness entering his voice. “Let all here
witness: By my right of high justice in all of Westeros, I declare Oberyn Martell to be an outlaw,
and an enemy of the Iron Throne. I denounce and attaint him, and command all leal men to do him
such harm as they are able. In aid whereof, I myself shall lead the hunt for him, and may the gods
defend the right.”

Lord Yronwood drew his sword from where he knelt and held it before him, the point resting on
the ground and his hands clasped about the hilt. “Here do I pledge my fealty and my allegiance to
His Grace, Stannis of House Baratheon, King in Westeros,” he said, his voice stronger now. “To
him shall I give my service without reservation, offering my tax and my counsel in peace and my
swords and my spears in war. His enemies are mine, as are his friends. Thus do I swear, binding me
and my heirs after me, while the mountains endure.”

“I hear and accept your oath, my lord.” Stannis replied, “and in doing so bind myself to reward what is given; fealty with love, valor with honor, good service with good lordship. All who do harm to you do harm to me, and at their peril. Thus do I swear, binding me and my heirs after me, while the line of my House endures.”

Lord Yronwood sheathed his sword, rose to his feet, and exchanged the kiss of peace with his monarch. Even then, Cortnay did not wholly relax until every man present shared bread and salt; old habits died hard, after all. Even later in the evening during the welcome feast in the castle hall when the wine came out and the Dornishmen drank to the health of King Stannis and his newborn son, Cortnay remained all too aware of where his sword and dagger hung on his belt.

The arrival of royal forces at Yronwood forced Oberyn to withdraw to the headwaters of the River Scourge; although he commanded the largest single army in Dorne, Oberyn could not hope to face Stannis’ army in open battle, especially not after it had been reinforced by Dornish royalists like Lord Yronwood. Nothing daunted, the Red Viper proceeded to move down the Scourge to the Greenblood, hoping to draw Stannis after him by threatening to capture Sunspear. Stannis wasted no time in setting out in pursuit, which was greatly aided by his securing the loyalty of House Jordayne thanks to the good offices of Ser Harold Jordayne, who had been in Stonehelm on business and enjoyed the distinction of being the first Dornish knight to swear fealty to Stannis during the Rebellion.

In Sunspear, the Martells prepared for a siege. They did so under a significant handicap; Prince Doran had been in an unstable emotional state ever since the death of his beloved sister. The news that his brother had rebelled against him brought on what the medical profession at the time called severe melancholia and what modern medicine would term acute depression. As a result, the responsibility of undertaking defensive measures largely devolved on his wife, Princess-Consort Mellario, and the officers of his household. Fortunately for the Martells, Mellario rose to the occasion...

“The last of the outrider parties has returned, my lady,” Ricasso said, consulting the scroll in his hand and thanking the gods for the opportunity to get out of the sun; this inner chamber of the Tower of the Sun was blessedly dark and cool after the glaring heat of late summer in southern Dorne. “The food they have gathered has been dispatched to the castle granary, and the able-bodied men and women of military age are being entered onto the levy rolls and provided weapons and armor. All that remains is to fire that part of the shadow city that lies outside the Winding Walls and we will have done all we can to prepare.”

Mellario, Princess Consort of Dorne, and it’s effective ruler thanks to the incapacitation of its Prince, nodded pensively. “Order Ser Manfrey to make preparations to do so, but to wait until the rebels are within sight of the walls before burning the city,” she commanded. “It would be ill-done if we destroyed our people’s homes and livelihoods unnecessarily.”

Ricasso blinked. “My lady believes that King Stannis may defeat the rebel?”

“In war, I am told, anything is possible,” Mellario replied. “At the very least, Stannis appears to have rather more men than my good-brother does.”

“Perhaps so, my lady, but numbers are not everything in war,” Ricasso replied; boldly perhaps, but he had grown old in House Martell’s service. That sort of tenure gave you privileges. “Were it otherwise, Dorne would have fallen to the first Aegon and we would almost certainly not be here.”

“Indeed,” Mellario observed, her tone mildly frosty. “In the event that it comes to a siege, how do
we stand to offer resistance?"

“I will need to review the final figures after today’s totals are tallied,” Ricasso answered, “but as of last report we have a thousand knights and men-at-arms in the city, along with twice as many levy infantry. We have provisions for three months at full rations and five at half rations. Our cisterns and wells are full, and at need we can boil seawater and condense the steam; it won’t produce much, but it will produce some water at least.”

“All our soldiers are loyal?” Mellario asked pointedly.

Ricasso spread his hands. “My lady, we can hardly expect a traitor to reveal themselves before they take action,” he said. “However, the nature of the walls provides some safeguard against the most dangerous kind of treachery. Any traitor seeking to open a gate to the rebel would need to open all three portals of the Threefold Gate at the same time and hold them until the rebels managed to secure them. I trust my lady will share my skepticism that so perilous a scheme could be executed.”

Mellario nodded. “I certainly admit that it would appear far-fetched,” she allowed, “but still I must consider that even so chancy a plot might succeed.” Left unsaid was the thought that no one had seriously contemplated that Oberyn would revolt against his brother.

Ricasso bowed. “Even in the event of such catastrophe, my lady, we would not be entirely undone,” he assured her. The Sandship can be held by less than two hundred men, if they are brave and well-led, and Captain Hotah has vowed that in the event of treachery he will hold the Sandship against all comers with the household guardsmen.”

Mellario smiled. “If Aro says so, then I believe him,” she said simply, reminding Ricasso that the Princess Consort had known Hotah for years before she ever came to Dorne. “Is there more news of the rebel and the king?”

Ricasso shook his head. “None that can be considered reliable, my lady,” he said regretfully. “As of our last reliable report, the rebels are still in the vicinity of Godsgrace attempting to subdue the Allyrians, and the king is advancing against them.”

“Very well,” Mellario said. “Thank you, Master Ricasso.”

Ricasso hesitated, then bowed. “If I may ask, my lady . . .” he began.

“About the Prince?” Mellario asked sharply, her eyes glinting. Ricasso bowed lower. “He remains as he has been since news of the rebellion reached us,” she said, her voice devoid of inflection. “Maester Caelotte is attending him to the best of his abilities, but he fears that the Prince’s condition is tied in some way to the state of the rebellion; he hopes that a victory may result in some improvement.”

Ricasso straightened and folded his hands in his sleeves. “Then I shall pray for the King’s victory, my lady,” he said calmly.

“Please do,” Mellario said, her expression softening. “You may go, Master Ricasso.”

Ricasso bowed and walked out of the room.

As it happened, Mellario’s preparations would prove unnecessary. Four days after the Threefold Gates were closed, a royal scouting party collided with a rebel scouting party a mile downriver from Godsgrace. Both commanders, thinking that they faced a much larger force than they truly did, immediately dispatched urgent requests for reinforcements . . .
- Blood and Sand: The Red Viper Rebellion by Maester Coran, published 1745 AC
Flight and Ultimatum

In the captain’s cabin of the *Conqueror’s Blade*, flagship of the Royal Fleet, the chiefs of the Targaryen loyalists sat and took wine. The mood was subdued; only the day before they had been forced to cut their way out of a city that had been roused against them, and the toll of that fighting march to the docks, and the grinding battle to hold the mobs away from the docks where their ships were berthed, weighed on their souls. Magister Rahtheon still had a haunted look in his eyes; for a man who had rebuilt his family’s fortunes from genteel poverty, the loss of wealth and position entailed by their flight was as harrowing as the prospect of being dismembered by the furious crowd. Ser Gyles Rambton, who as Lord Admiral was the de facto master of ships, and Ser Marq Grafton, who commanded the Gulltown squadrons, had only in the past hour lost the involuntary shaking in their fingers that had made writing and holding a full glass difficult. Ser Arthur Dayne and Ser Barristan Selmy had concealed their own agitations ruthlessly, but they had both been grateful for the opportunity to get away from prying eyes and permit themselves to feel the fear that the mobs had struck in them. Arthur, for one, knew that there would be a special place in his nightmares for the surf-roar of ten thousand people driven mad by fear and rage, punctuated by the pounding chant of “Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!”

After a moment of silence, Arthur leaned forward. “My lords,” he said formally, “before we begin, I must thank you all for the courage and prowess you showed during our most recent difficulty. As soon as we have the opportunity, we will need to provide a suitable reward to the men for their steadfastness, especially the sailors of the fleet. If they had not stood fast, we would not have been able to make good our escape.”

“And what exactly do you mean to reward them with?” Marq asked sardonically. “Knighthoods all around? A knighthood is a fine thing to be sure, but you can’t spend it on wine, women, and song, nor yet send it home to the family, and the men have yet to be paid this month. And if we have more than three hundred gold dragons between us, I’ll eat my boots.”

“We are not utterly destitute,” Rahtheon replied. “The majority of my assets may have been lost in Myr, but I have properties and accounts in the other Free Cities. We will not starve, at least.”

“All well and good,” Gyles replied, “but what do we do after we find our feet again? My lords, if the Usurper has followed us this far, he will not hesitate to follow us farther. And if Myr could not withstand him, do we truly think that Lys or Tyrosh can do so?”

“The Usurper has no fleet,” said Barristan, “and Lys and Tyrosh are island cities. He may be able to storm Myr, but he cannot do as much to Lys or Tyrosh unless he finds some way to march an army across water.”

“And would the Tyroshi or the Lyseni prove more resilient than we did?” Rahtheon asked. “I know them, ser knight, and the moment we become a greater liability than an asset, they will throw us to the Usurper as the Conclave did.”

There was a moment of silence as all around the table acknowledged the truth of Rahtheon’s words. The Tyroshi were the most martial of the Three Daughters, but they were raiders and slavers for the most part, not soldiers fit to face down the Sunset Company. And the Lyseni were brothel-keepers, not warriors; they hired sellswords to fight their wars, and the Sunset Company had demonstrated at Pentos and Tara that they could handle sellswords.
Arthur drummed his fingers on the table. “So if Tyrosh and Lys are not suitable,” he said, “then we must look further afield.” He turned to Rahtheon. “How stand your contacts and your affairs in Volantis, my lord?”

Rahtheon spread his hands. “Broad enough, among the merchant community,” he said. “Less so among the Old Blood, who do not directly involve themselves in day-to-day business; they have people to do that for them. Their banks are less powerful and not as refined as the Iron Bank of Braavos, but they are sound enough that I have monies deposited in their vaults.”

“If any of the Free Cities can defeat the Usurper, Volantis can,” Rahtheon replied. “Of all of Valyria’s daughters they are the strongest on land, thanks to their control of the River Rhoyne and the fields it waters.”

“I mislike it,” Marq interjected. “In Myr, we had the strength to rule the city, however tenuous that rule may have been. In Volantis we will be a curiosity, and one without the strength to determine our fates. If the Old Blood decide to throw us to the Usurper, we will not be able to resist them anymore than we could the Myrish.”

“It is that very strength that may prevent such ill-fortune,” Arthur answered. “If the Volantenes are indeed strong enough to render us a minor power, they will almost certainly be strong enough to hold the Usurper at bay, especially for the next few years, at least.” Arthur leaned forward. “My lords, even if the Usurper conquers Myr, which is not an outcome preordained, he will not be in a position to seriously challenge Volantis for some time. At the very least he will have to reduce Lys and Tyrosh, if not utterly subjugate them, and accomplishing that and repairing the damage enough to weld them into a single kingdom will take years, if I am any judge. Even if he demands that the Old Blood turn us out of the city, he will not be able to back up his threats with force until he can send an army from Myr to The Sorrows and not be threatened by invasions from his rear.”

Gyles nodded. “I agree with Ser Arthur’s logic,” he said. “I say we sail for Volantis.”

“We’ll need to stop at Tyrosh or Lys, first,” said Marq. “Sailing straight to Volantis will cut very close to the limit of our supplies, especially of water. One week without wind would be the death of us.”

“We’ll stop at Tyrosh,” Arthur replied. “If we stopped at Lys we’d never get the men on board again.” The chuckles that ran around the table at the thought of trying to enforce discipline among sailors and soldiers in Lys of all cities masked an undertone of unease. All commanders dreaded mutiny.

When all had filed out again, Gyles to the Blade’s quarterdeck, Marq to his own Gulltown’s Pride, Rahtheon to his daughter’s cabin to apprise her of the council’s decision, and Barristan to Viserys’ cabin, Arthur knelt beside the curtained bed that contained the comatose body of his king. He did not bother to speak; if Rhaegar could hear and understand, then he would have heard and understood all that the council had said. All that remained was to protect him. And if he died, as looked more likely with every day, then Arthur would protect his heir as fiercely as he had protected him, whether that heir was Viserys or a son born of Queen Praela.

He had sworn an oath.

XXX

Talaeron Arreos made for a decent exemplar of that category of humans titled “Myrish, young
man, upper-class.” He was well-educated in the skills that became a young aristocrat of his people, well-spoken, reasonably popular among his peers, and bade fair to make a worthy heir to his father’s trading concern. He stood out from the mass of his peers in two respects. Firstly, he had a reputation for being able to keep his countenance even in extremity; a skill he had developed in order to better supplement his allowance by relieving his peers of theirs at cards. Secondly, he spoke the Common Tongue of the Andals more fluently than any of his peers; Common Tongue was widely known among the Myrish aristocracy for trade, but Talaeron was almost unique in that he knew it well enough to not only recite but also discuss poetry in it.

It was these two skills that resulted in his being chosen as the Conclave’s ambassador to the Sunset Company.

His father hadn’t even been able to object, as much as he would have wished to. The Arreos clan was relatively low-ranked among the magisters of Myr, which made the selection of Talaeron as an ambassador an even greater honor than it normally was. Of course, in this particular case the honor was decidedly a mixed one, given that it would place him within the power of the Sunset Company and their armed slaves, but inquiries had established that, as barbaric as the Andals were, they at least understood that an ambassador’s person was inviolate. And if Talaeron could manage to claim hospitality, then even the most uncivilized Andal or the most rabid slave would think twice about doing him harm. Apparently among the Andals, a man who broke guest right, as they called it, would have serious cause to regret his breach of etiquette fervently and at length.

So when Talaeron was admitted to the tent of Lord Robert Baratheon, Captain-General of the Sunset Company, he was relieved to see bread, salt, and wine on the table off to one side and perturbed to see that the two men on either side of the Lord’s chair, one golden-haired and handsomely severe with his gilded armor contrasted by a black cloak, and the other dark-haired and scowling in plain unburnished steel, held unsheathed longswords before them with the points resting between their feet. If he recalled his hurried lessons correctly, that meant that hospitality was not granted, but not yet denied either, and Baratheon was willing to be convinced one way or the other.

He swallowed his nervousness, set aside the way his ambassadorial finery was cut a touch too tightly for comfort, clicked his heels, and bowed shortly. “My lord Baratheon, I presume?” he asked in the neutrally polite tones that merchants and diplomats both had as their usual manner of speaking.

The man sitting in the Lord’s chair nodded slowly. Talaeron had heard the rumors, of course, but the rumors, in this case, were only partially connected to reality. The Andal was a big man, of course, even seated, but not quite the towering ogre that rumor had painted. His head was quite normal, if proportionate to his size and decked with heavy, flowing black hair; Talaeron assumed that the antlered helmet resting at the top of the armor-stand to one side of the tent had given rise to the claim that he had a stag’s head. The bright blue eyes were intelligent and piercing, hardly alight with lust for blood or carnal pleasure. His trousers, shirt, and doublet were plain, but they were clean, well-made, and perfectly respectable, the sort of thing you would expect any nobleman to wear and hardly the blood-matted furs of rumor. In all, Talaeron thought to himself, a man after all and hardly the monster of rumor. “I am he,” the Andal said in a deep voice that could probably swell to a stunning roar at need. “Are you come from the Conclave?”

“I have the honor to be the Conclave’s ambassador, my lord,” Talaeron answered. “In proof of which, I present my credentials.” He handed over the fine paper scroll, closed with the official seal of the Conclave and decked with the seals of all fifteen of the Conclave’s members, which proved his status. Baratheon accepted it, broke the seal with a flick of his thumb, and glanced over its contents.
A minute later he rolled up the scroll and handed it off to the pimple-faced young man who was standing behind his chair. “Your credentials are accepted,” he said. “What does the Conclave want?”

Talareon bowed. “The Conclave, my lord, wishes to ask what terms you will accept to bring an end to this war,” he replied. “The Conclave wishes also to inform you that Rhaegar Targaryen and his followers have left the city bound for points unknown.”

“The Rapist yet lives?” the dark-haired lord standing at Baratheon’s right hand asked sharply.

Talaeron spread his hands. “I do not know to say yea or nay, my lord,” he replied. “The Targaryen was not seen abroad in the city after the battle, and he was carried to the ships in an enclosed horse-litter. It was rumored that he was sorely wounded at Tara, but whether he has died or yet lives is unknown to me.”

Baratheon waved a hand. “The reptile can wait his turn, then,” he said dismissively. “What terms does the Conclave offer that I should listen to them?”

Talaeron bowed. “As it please my lord, I was not told what terms the Conclave offer or accept,” he said carefully. This was the serious part. “I was bidden only to hear what terms you would accept as sufficient to end this war and convey them to the Conclave.”

Baratheon leaned back in his chair. “The only terms we will accept are unconditional surrender,” he said flatly. “Any who wish to leave the city may do so upon the surrender of all wealth they hold in the city, including their slaves. In return, I will not turn the city over to the soldiers to be sacked, and no man will be sentenced to die for any crimes they may have committed against their slaves.”

It took all of Talaeron’s self-control not to gape. “My lord,” he said when he finally regained enough confidence that he felt able to speak without stuttering, “these terms are impossible. I am not privy to the Conclave’s deliberations but I know for a certainty that they will never accept such terms as these!”

“They can accept these terms,” Baratheon said, glowering, “or they can take their chances in a sack. I have sufficient force here to take the city by storm; the freedmen alone outnumber your soldiers within the walls by at least two to one. Your soldiers that are still outside the walls are too busy fighting rebel slaves to march to your aid and even if they did we would cut them to pieces. You have more than two hundred thousand slaves within your walls; do you truly think that you can hold the walls against us and the city against them at the same time?” The massively built Andal pointed a sausage-sized finger at Talaeron. “The only two choices available to the Conclave,” he said in tones of absolute finality, “are these. Surrender and live, or fight and die. You’ve seen my army, boy. How confident are you that your city can fight it off?”

Talaeron shuddered involuntarily. The escort of knights that had met him halfway to the siege lines had been intimidating enough, like so many faceless metal monsters with swords and lances, but the slave, instantly identifiable by the scar around his neck that could only have come from a collar, who had stared at him with incandescent hatred in his eyes as he almost lovingly sharpened a short-sword had been chilling. And the sea of tents that spread around the walls of Myr held thousands of such men, each thirsting for bloody revenge. Talaeron had a sister and two nieces, and he had heard the tales of the Sunset Company’s march to Myr.

*I am a son of Myr,* he reminded himself sternly. *Fear is beneath my dignity.* “I will carry your terms to the Conclave, my lord,” he said formally. “But I must warn you that they will find little favor.”
“I don’t care how little they favor our terms, so long as they surrender,” Baratheon replied. “They can have the rest of this sennight to think it over.”

The Conclave responded to the demand for unconditional surrender with an offer to grant the officers of the Sunset Company titles of nobility and land in the northern part of the Myrish hinterlands, along with substantial donatives to each officer and also to the company as a whole. Robert responded to their offer by ordering the Corps of Pioneers, who had constructed a trio of mangonels during the negotiations, to begin bombarding the city. By the laws of war then in effect during this period, this signaled the end of negotiations; the siege of Myr was officially begun and could only end in victory for one side and defeat for the other.

- Chasing Dragons: The Sunset Company Reexamined by Maester Hendricus, published 1539 AC
Maester Gordon had always loved the sight of a tough job well done. His stonemason father, before sending him to the Citadel, had made Gordon earn his journeyman’s ring the hard way, and the life of a stonemason’s apprentice could be brutally hard. But seeing the actual finished product, especially of a tough, difficult job that strained the limits of your strength and skill, had an almost magical way of making the bruises and aches sting less painfully.

So looking at the finished product of what was probably the toughest job he had yet to undertake had him almost walking on clouds.

The problem had been multi-layered from the start. Firstly, the walls of Myr were forty feet high and some twenty feet thick. And if they weren’t quite as formidable as the walls of Oldtown or Riverrun or any other Westerosi castle, they were still plenty tall and stout enough to withstand the three mangonels that were the heaviest artillery that Gordon and his Pioneers had had the means to construct. So opening a breach by bombardment was out of the question.

Secondly, the soil around Myr wasn’t suitable for undermining, even if they had had the time to dig enough tunnels that one of them would slip past the inevitable counter-mines. Digging a mine ten or more feet across and some six hundred yards long would take sennights, even before they dug out a chamber underneath the actual walls large enough to cause a practicable breach. By that time, the company would be reduced to eating their remaining horses and draught beasts; if the assault failed they would be eating their boots and belts shortly thereafter, and then starvation would make them easy prey even for the Myrmen, much less any Dothraki that happened by. So mining was also out of the question.

And the traditional way of prosecuting a siege, by blockading the target and starving it out, was hilariously impractical. Myr’s logistical issues were even greater than those facing the Sunset Company, to be sure, but the Myrish also had an open harbor and a fleet that could carry supplies from anywhere else in the world and carry them into the city. The Ironborn’s longships were still in storage at Mytila, on the southern Braavosi coast, and even if they had been here, twenty longships could not hope to blockade any city against a respectable fleet of galleys and dromonds, such as the Myrish had.

That left escalade as the only practical option, along with battering down the gates. It was an option only rarely resorted to, on account of the hideous casualties it usually caused and the uncertainty of success when faced by skilled and determined opposition, but the captains, and especially Robert, believed that it could be made to work. The Myrish had shown that they were brave, at Tara, but they hadn’t been able to stand against Westerosi men-at-arms in close combat.

So the Pioneers had been ordered to build a pair of siege towers, a covered battering ram, and as many scaling ladders as they could. Gordon had ransacked every town, village, hamlet, and yeoman’s cottage for miles around, tearing down buildings and cutting down trees for timber, and worked his men every hour of daylight for the past three sennights. And his efforts had borne fruit. Two siege towers reared nearly sixty feet in the air, looming menacingly against the night sky with wetted hides, rugs, and tapestries covering their faces in a riotous patchwork of texture and color, and a battering ram lurked under its protective roof. Arrayed around the towers were a dozen ladders, each sized to overtop the walls.
Gordon wouldn’t fancy being the man who went up those ladders first, but that wasn’t his job. His Pioneers had claimed one of the ladders for themselves, but he wouldn’t be going up it; he had never trained to arms, beyond the brawling techniques every working lad needed, and he would never see forty again, either.

The men who would be going up the ladders and the towers, and taking the ram in, were already preparing themselves for the assault tomorrow.

XXX

Robert and Eddard shared a flagon of wine in Robert’s tent in companionable silence, both thinking on the morrow. They would both be going up one of the towers; Robert had had to go, of course, and Eddard, knowing better than to gainsay him, had insisted on joining him. Someone, he had claimed, had to watch Robert’s back. The laugh that had gone around the council table had had an edge to it; everyone knew that the one common strand that held all the pieces of the company together was their acknowledgement of Robert’s leadership. Especially after Tara men followed him as they wouldn’t follow Eddard or Jaime, or even the Blackfish.

Where other men would have been nervously discussing the assault tomorrow, the foster-brothers knew there was nothing to discuss. Everything was in readiness for the assault, from the two great towers to the arrows stockpiled for the archers. And they were both confident enough in their own abilities and those of their men to not make idle boasts or seek reassurance.

There were other things to talk about though.

“Have you considered that that ambassador might have been lying when he said Rhaegar had left the city?” Eddard asked finally. “For all we know, he could be hiding in some cellar somewhere waiting for us to dig him out.”

“If that were the case, then the royal fleet would still be in the harbor, and this siege would be a lot more difficult,” Robert said. “If nothing else, I wouldn’t try an escalade in the face of the lizard’s lackeys; they might serve a rapist and a murderer, but Gods witness they can fight. No cowards or empty braggarts among that lot, not after Tara.”

Eddard nodded. “And so long as he has a fleet and we don’t, we can’t catch the bastard,” he said sourly. “Hence this siege.”

Robert tipped his hand from side to side. “Among other things,” he qualified. “For one, the freedmen would mutiny if we didn’t at least try an assault.” Eddard gestured acknowledgement; Akhollo, their elected captain and representative, along with Maester Gordon, had more than once said that he and his were fighting for their freedom, not ‘some Andal girl’, as he put it. And their freedom depended on the complete destruction of slavery in at least this corner of Essos. “For another,” Robert paused, marshalling his thoughts. “We’re being carried along on the back of something big here, Ned. I thought I had it figured out in Pentos, but I didn’t know how just how many slaves there were in the East. It feels like it does in Storm’s End, when a howling storm is coming in from the sea and the wind’s just starting to pick up. When that storm breaks . . . “ he shrugged his massive shoulders. “What we’ve done so far will look like a tourney, is the best feeling I have of it.”

Eddard nodded somberly, contemplating the look he had seen in the freedmen’s eyes when they spoke of freedom. It was the same look some men got when they talked about their gods. “So long as Rhaegar dies,” he said finally, his voice as hard as northern stone. “Whoever else lives or dies, I will not rest until Rhaegar is food for worms and crows.”
“Nor will I,” Robert said. “But if we want to live long enough to take our revenge, then we need to carve out a kingdom here, and make it as strong as we can.” Robert swirled the wine in his cup. “Myr isn’t Storm’s End,” he said. “But it’ll do.”

The two foster-brothers sat and drank meditatively for a few moments more, and then Eddard drained his cup and stood. “I need to go,” he said. “The men will be gathering soon, with the sun going down.” The Northmen, lacking a heart tree or any other kind of tree thanks to the Pioneers’ insatiable demand for timber, had decided to simply face northward as they prayed tonight.

Robert stood. “I need to go out as well,” he said, tossing back the rest of his wine. “The men will be better for seeing me.” Robert was no more than conventionally pious, being of the opinion that the here and now was far more important than whatever might be waiting for him after he died. That said, he knew that his soldiers would fight better for a man they knew than they would for a stranger, and seeing that they that shared their beliefs also went a long way towards binding them to him. And in any case, it was a lord’s duty to honor the gods his folk worshipped, in much the same way that even a lord who couldn’t fight was expected to take the field when his people went to war. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“In the first light of dawn,” Eddard said, grinning wolfishly, “and we’ll have our luncheon in Myr.”

The foster-brothers clasped forearms and embraced roughly.

XXX

Jaime Lannister hadn’t gone to a sept with serious intent since he joined the Kingsguard. He had never been particularly pious to begin with, and standing guard at Queen Rhaella’s door on those nights when Aerys had visited her had turned his heart against the gods. There were things that shouldn’t be allowed to happen, especially when they could be prevented by a strong man with a sharp sword.

But his mind was in too much turmoil. His uncle, who had first taught him the blade, was dead, killed by some nameless sellsword for all love, and although Jaime knew he was not as callow as he had been when the company had landed, he still felt anchorless without his uncle’s gruff, solid dependability underwriting him. He and Uncle Gerion had mourned Tygett’s death with a flagon of strong Tyroshi brandy and old memories, but while Gerion had seemed much better for it, the loss still ate at Jaime’s confidence. Especially since he had failed the last serious challenge he had faced without his uncle’s aid.

Of all the knights in the world, Jaime had known, one of the best was Ser Arthur Dayne. The Sword of the Morning hadn’t just been a peerless swordsman, but a man of flawless honor and incomparable chivalry. Nor had it been solely repute; Jaime had seen him live the legend when he had allowed the Smiling Knight to take up another sword when his first broke in their famous duel. And Jaime had never seen him be anything less than the picture of courtesy, even when faced with vexation.

And then he had helped Rhaegar kidnap Lyanna Stark. Jaime cared little for the Stark girl, personally, but he had heard Aerys visit Rhaella after a man had been burned, and Rhaella’s pleas. If Ser Arthur had not only stood aside while something similar had happened to the Stark girl but had a hand in bringing it about . . . the thought of it made Jaime nauseous.

When a Kingsguard turned to wrong it fell to their Sworn Brothers to punish them. It was why Jaime had attacked Ser Arthur in that last snarling melee during the pursuit from Tara. But Ser Arthur had handled him like a seasoned knight handled a new squire. Even with Stark pitching in, and quite well for a Northman if Jaime was being honest, Ser Arthur would almost certainly have
killed them both if he hadn’t been forced to fall back to prevent the rest of the Targaryen forces from being overrun. Jaime knew he was good with a sword, better than anyone his age he had ever fought. And as the saying went, even John the Oak or Serwyn of the Mirror Shield couldn’t beat two men at once.

The only explanation Jaime could come up with was that the Warrior had favored Ser Arthur in that fight. Which posed its own problem; why would the gods look with favor on a man who had facilitated rape?

When he asked Septon Jonothor that question, after the fierce-eyed cleric had finished saying Divine Office for the Westermen and heard the last man’s confession, the Septon had nodded understandingly, a grim set to his jaw. “It is one of the more common reasons that men doubt the gods,” he replied. “And one of the most dangerous, because taken at face value it cannot be answered. If the gods are indeed all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, as the Seven-Pointed Star tells us, then evil ought not to exist.” Jonothor sat down on the ground with a grunt and motioned for Jaime to sit with him. As Jaime did so, Jonothor continued. “That said, there are arguments against it. To begin with, the gods gave us minds and wills of our own, which perforce grants us the ability to choose evil over good. Therefore evil does not arise from the negligence or the culpable action of the gods, but by solely human agency, for which the gods cannot be justly blamed. For another,” Jonothor gestured at the setting sun, “what is evil in the first place but the absence of an element of good, or a deviation from good? Bethink you, young Lannister; if we lived all our lives in the sunlight, how would we know what darkness is? How would we know what heat is without knowing what cold is? As darkness is to light and cold is to heat, so evil is to good; something without which it’s opposite could not be experienced, much less defined.” Jaime shrugged; he had never paid much attention when his father’s maester had tried to teach him logic, but he could see how the argument followed.

Jonothor turned his gimlet eyes on Jaime again. “All that said,” he went on, “my personal opinion is that whether or not the problem of evil contradicts the nature of the gods as we understand it is irrelevant. We are mortals, made imperfectly and born to suffer, but we have the strength to struggle against that suffering. And in our struggles we may pray to the gods for their aid; to the Father for justice, to the Mother for mercy, to the Warrior for strength, and so on. But the onus of the struggle rests on our shoulders alone. It is for us to either submit to our misfortunes, or to overcome them. It is for us to conquer our imperfections and defeat our difficulties, or to surrender to them.” He pointed a finger skywards. “Whatever choice we make,” he said, “the gods watch us, and judge whether we have proved ourselves worthy of reward. For those who submit to despair, the afterlife is much like this one, albeit less painful. But for those who overcome the difficulties that life sets against them, or who perish valiantly in their struggle, the Gates of the Seven Heavens truly open, and the delights of paradise await.” He aimed the finger he had pointed at the heavens at Jaime. “That is the choice before you, Jaime Lannister,” he said sternly. “Will you turn aside from your duty to punish your former brother for his crimes? Or will you persevere, even at the cost of your life? Choose wisely, young Lannister; the fate of your soul depends upon it.”

With that Jonothor levered himself to his feet and strode off towards the tents of the Rivermen. Jaime remained sitting; he had much to think over.

XXX

The faiths of the Seven Kingdoms each had their own way of how a man prepared to die in battle. A man who worshipped the Seven would hear Divine Office, confess his sins, and receive the blessing of a septon. A man who followed the Old Gods would simply pray, and ask the Old Gods to watch over him in the fray; in the old days a dog, a horse, or even a man would be sacrificed to entice the Old Gods’ favor, but those practices had long since died out.
Those who offered to the Drowned God, on the other hand, had a different way entirely.

A roaring bonfire had been built on the sea-strand with hoarded and salvaged wood and the Ironborn of the company were keeping wassail under the bright sickle-moon with as much of the company’s stores of wine and beer as they could get their hands on. It was the way of the Ironborn to defy the coming of death with raucous celebration, with strong drink flowing like rivers, with thunderous song, and with men boasting of what deeds they would accomplish before the Drowned God took them to His halls and swearing to fight to the death beside their shield-brothers and their gold-giving lord.

This night, they had been joined by the followers of the Red God, who offered their own prayers to the Lord of Light to the acclamation of their fellows. As these prayers were almost all for courage in the coming battle, the Ironborn invariably joined in the acclamation with their traditional shout of “Wassail!” It was right and proper, to their thinking, for a man to call on his gods for aid in battle, especially if they then went out and fought with every ounce of their strength. And since the men offering the prayers would be the first ones up the ladders tomorrow that could be taken as read.

The drowned priests would have forbidden the intermingling, of course, but none had followed the company to Essos. And even if they had, they would have been hard-put to enforce the prohibition; above all else the Ironborn respected strength and courage. The freedmen had demonstrated both in spectacular fashion at Tara, and it was doubtful that a priest would have done as much. In point of fact, a priest would probably have been excluded from the revel as much as the women of the company were, and for the same reason; this was a night for men.

One man, as pale as any Westerosi, stood forward in the firelight and raised his hand, quieting the laughter and the shouts as all within hearing range gave ear to witness; the bard who had been chanting a lay of Dalton the Red Kraken let his voice trail off and the beat of his hand-drum soften to a murmur. “Tomorrow,” the freedman said in halting Common Tongue only lightly flavored with Low Valyrian, “we fight. O Lord of Light let me fight with my sword in my hand and your flames in my heart.” The freedmen round about murmured agreement. “So that if I should die in the assault,” the freedman continued, “and face the terrible night of death, I will know that you, Lord who lights the fires of freedom, are with me, and I shall fear no man. I ask this by your grace, God of Flame and Shadow.” The freedman raised his leather drinking-jack. “Drink hail!” he cried in the fashion that had spread from the Ironborn to the freedmen at the speed of alcohol.

“Wassail!” the revelers roared back, raising drinking-jacks, tankards, and ale-horns. The hum of conversation rose again as the freedman stepped back into the crowd and the bard began to chant again of Red Dalton and his raids. A short time later another freedman stood forward, this one a Summer Islander with a short beard and skin like polished ebony. Again the noise of the crowd died to a murmur.

“You know, Lord of Light,” the freedman began, “that I was taken as a slave with all my family, and that we were sold to different masters, so that we have not seen or heard from each other since. You know also, Lord, that many of us here have suffered so.” There were murmurs of agreement through the crowd. “So Lord of Light, I come before you tonight to ask that if tomorrow is the day we die, that you visit our families in the night of their terror and tell them that we died with our faces to the enemy.” There was a ripple of approval from the freedmen, and also from the Ironborn. “Let our families know, Lord,” the freedman went on, his voice building, “that we died with our teeth in the throats of our enslavers.” The chorus of approval was shouted now, and a few Dothraki freedmen gave the short high-pitched whoops that presaged the blood-scream. “Let them know, Lord,” the freedman shouted, “that we died free!” There were roars of approbation from every quarter now, and those with weapons flourished them in the firelight. “I ask this of your Grace, o
Heart of Flame, knowing how you love justice and hate the evildoer,” said the freedman, raising his goblet. “Drink hail!”

“Wassail!” the crowd roared back, drinking deep to seal the prayer. Victarion stood from where he had been sitting on a log and motioned to the men who had been serving the drink, who promptly began to refill the emptied containers.

“Brothers!” Victarion roared in his battle-voice, already deep for one as young as he. “The gods witness that I hate to cut short a revel such as this. But we must rise early tomorrow, and I am told that we are running out of drink anyway.” There was scattered laughter at the slight jest. “So allow me to end this night with a boast on behalf of us all!” he cried, holding his horn out before him. “After we drink hail to this boast, neither wine nor beer nor ale shall pass our lips until we slake our thirst in the palaces of Myr! And if the Drowned God wills that we drink not there, we shall go to His halls and drink them dry!” He raised his horn high. “Drink hail!” he roared.

“WASSAIL!” the Ironborn bellowed back amid gales of laughter. It was just the sort of madcap, daredevil gesture that spoke to the soul of every Ironborn, who learned from the cradle that all the riches of the earth were theirs if they were bold enough to seize them. The freedmen also added their voices to the toast, with a savage edge that made even hardened and tipsy reavers blink. As the revelers staggered to their beds, Ironborn and freedmen alike clasped hands and swore to fight to the death on the morrow; the Ironborn for honor’s sake, and the freedmen for the sake of Holy Freedom.
The first rays of dawn found the Sunset Company in ranks and ready to attack. During the night, the siege towers and scaling ladders had been wheeled to the head of the trench lines by the Pioneers, just two hundred yards from the walls. Robert’s Stormlanders were packed in behind one, aimed at the northern side of the Great Eastern Gate, with Eddard’s Northmen squeezed in with them. Behind the other tower, aimed at the next section of wall northward, the Westermen and the Ironborn were packed in a solid column while behind the dozen men carrying each scaling ladder there was a mass of men (and a few hard women) in the varied armor of the freedmen.

The few septons that had followed the company to the east walked up and down the lines, granting general absolution. When the septons came by the Stormlanders, there was a rush of rustling and clanking as armored men knelt and signed themselves with the seven-pointed star while the septon recited the sacrament. Eddard and his Northmen also knelt, but not for the septon. Each Northman took a pinch of dirt from the ground and held it to his lips; the more devout swallowed it, as Eddard did. From the earth we come, and to the earth we return, Eddard recited to himself, in the traditional prayer that the followers of the old gods made when faced with likely death. Gods of my fathers, watch over me amid the shattering of the spears. Grant me your strength, that I might overcome my enemies. And if I die, know that I accept it willingly, for each must die someday. So mote it be.

As the company stood, Robert held out his hand and his squire Richard Horpe handed him a horn. Robert paused, looked down the line of the company, and then blew a sky-shaking blast. “Forward!” he roared. “Justice and vengeance!”

With an answering bellow of “Justice and vengeance!” the company advanced under the patchy sky. Men put their shoulders to the poles that stuck out from the base of the siege towers and pushed, so that the great contraptions began to roll forward slowly. The freedmen, far quicker off the mark, loped forward in a dozen columns, each one tipped by a scaling ladder. As they advanced the freedmen gave voice to a baying roar, like hounds at the scent of a boar, slowly overridden by a chant of “Free or dead!”

The defenders of Myr were not long in replying. The first crossbow bolts began to fly within moments, followed by bolts from the quintet of springalds mounted atop the walls. The first screams rose up to the sky, but they went unheeded by men who were still more angry than afraid. For his part, Eddard raised the shield he had taken from the supply wagons and plodded on behind the tower. The plate armor he was wearing was all but impervious to any but the heaviest of crossbows barring very bad luck indeed, but a shield would help with those odds regardless, though he would discard it once he went up the siege tower and rely on his longsword.

The fact that the shield would be no help at all if one of the springalds hit him was something he consciously disregarded. Some things just didn’t bear thinking about.

After a seeming eternity of slowly marching behind the tower through a rain of bolts, the tower finally ground to a halt; they had reached the foot of the wall. Eddard tossed aside the shield and followed Robert up the series of steep stairs and ladders to the second-topmost level. On the actual topmost level there were a dozen archers and crossbowmen from the freedmen who were even now raking the wall with arrows and bolts, trying to clear a space for the knights and men-at-arms swarming up the tower to attack into. At last, when the second-topmost level was filled with men,
each with the staring eyes and curling lips that Eddard knew as the visible signs of the battle-fury, the gangplank creaked downwards, those men with visors closed them, and with a wordless roar of fear-fueled fury, Robert and Eddard tucked their shoulders into their shields and stormed forward.

They were met with a volley of crossbow bolts that thudded into their shields like a storm of hammerblows but failed to do them any harm, and the two foster-brothers dropped their shields and rushed across the gangplank and onto the wall before the defenders could reload. Eddard fought in grim silence, but for the huff of expended breath as he struck out with his longsword, alternating diagonal overhands with short thrusts as he sought to cut a path through the Myrmens. Robert, by contrast, laughed and roared as he laid about him with his hammer, each blow dashing a Myrmen to the ground. “Three!” he bellowed, as he crushed a helmet. “Four!” as he shattered a scale breastplate. “Come on you bastards, my hammer’s hungry!” Behind them came a flood of Northmen and Stormlanders. The Greatjon was next on the wall after Eddard and the first blow of his greatsword cleaved through two Myrmens and knocked a third off the wall screaming. Ser William Fell, commonly called ‘Silveraxe,’ shouldered his way onto Robert’s left side, his famous axe rising and falling like a blacksmith’s hammer, while Richard Horpe followed Robert as close as he could without impeding his lord’s fighting room. Maege and Dacey Mormont jumped off the gangplank with shadowcat screams, their maces whirring. Ser Brus Buckler fell in on Robert’s right, his sword and shield working like a boxer’s fists. They had a foothold on the wall.

But they didn’t have the towers on either side of them. Those towers were full of crossbowmen loosing bolts as fast as they could span their crossbows and even against heavy armor the bolts told as either chance or skill sent them through the gaps in protection that every suit of armor had; the stones being cast from the roofs of those towers were even more effective, if less accurate. A Northman in Umber livery fell screaming as a bolt punched through the mail skirt beneath his breastplate and skewered his groin. A Stormlander with a visor-less sallet helm was shot through the face and toppled off the gangplank without so much as a sigh, dead long before he hit the ground sixty feet below. The Myrish spearmen, defending their homes and families, closed ranks and fought with the grim doggedness of men with everything to lose, holding the Westerosi at bay with a wall of shields and a hedge of spear points. Arnolf Karstark tried to break through the spears and was cut off and stabbed to death with daggers. Maege Mormont stood over the body of her daughter Dacey, slain by a ten-pound stone thrown from a tower that broke her skull, and wept as she slew. The archers and crossbowmen on the siege tower took every shot they could, but they were beginning to run short of arrows, and what was more three of them were dead and four more severely wounded.

To compound the problem, there simply wasn’t enough space. The foothold on the wall was already packed with men and no more could fit, so that the flood of reinforcements became clogged on the gangplank of the siege tower, a prime target for crossbow and rock and thrown spear. The Westerosi were being stymied, bottled up by spearmen who forewent trying to push them off the wall by their own efforts and simply held them in place for the crossbows to chip away at them.

On the other segment of the wall, much the same thing was happening. Gregor Clegane and Victarion Greyjoy had led the rush across the gangplanks, with Jaime Lannister and Dagmer Cleftjaw hard on their heels; the Mountain, who had missed the final scrambling melee in the pursuit from Tara thanks to his horse founder beneath him, had flatly refused to let Jaime be first onto the wall and offered to eat the guts of any man who tried to stop him. Now, on the walls of Myr, Gregor Clegane was proving his worth as every swing of his massive greatsword felled a Myrmen. Roaring with the battle-lust, he forged ahead into the crowd of Myrmens, blazing a path to the door of the tower separating the Westerners and the Ironborn from the Stormlanders and Northmen. He was twenty steps deep in the Myrish phalanx when a fifteen-pound rock thrown from the tower he had been making for struck him on the helmet and dropped him to his knees,
stunned. Talaeron Arreos, who was one of the officers on this stretch of wall, dropped shield and spear and, drawing a dagger, tackled the Mountain, knocking him fully prone. Clegane, who managed to come to his senses a bare moment before the young Myrman was able to drive the dagger into his visor, caught the young Myrman’s wrist in one hand and his neck in the other and crushed his throat by main strength, but by then another Myrman had dropped his shield and spear to take up the stone that had stunned the Mountain. Propelled downward by frantic, hateful, desperate strength, the stone split in half even as it broke Clegane’s helmet asunder along the weld-lines and smashed him down into unconsciousness. A quartet of Myrmen who flung themselves on him with daggers stabbed him to death in the next instant, even as the Myrman who had taken up the stone stamped his boot down on his head as a man stamps on a scorpion he has stumbled across by surprise.

Even as the Mountain had blazed his last trail of blood and death, the Myrish spears had closed behind him and held the Andals at bay. Jaime, Victarion, and Dagmer were swiftly joined by Jaime’s uncle Gerion, Lyle Crakehal, Harras Harlaw, and Addam Marbrand, but the same problems that were befalling Robert and Eddard on the next section of wall over were befalling them. There was simply too little space and too many Myrmen resolved to shed their heart’s blood in the last ditch to protect their families and their livelihoods for any collection of paladins to overcome.

The assault would almost certainly have been repulsed with great loss, but two things happened that later chroniclers almost uniformly ascribed to the will of the gods.

XXX

Gordon’s heart sank as he saw the freedmen begin to fall back from the wall. With a shout of “Follow me!” to those of his Pioneers who hadn’t gone forward yet, he plunged forward towards the retreating men; he was not terribly conversant with how fighting men acted under these sorts of conditions, but he had heard about how important it was to stop a retreat as quickly as possible, before it became a rout. The freedmen’s officers were already bellowing themselves hoarse as they waded into their men, cursing mightily as they exhorted their men to stand and fight, but they needed help.

He body-checked the first retreating set of retreating men he came to. “Stop, godsdamnit!” he roared in their faces. “Stop! We’ll beat the bastards yet!” Moving on, he grabbed an underofficer by the shoulders and shook him roughly. “Grow some balls, man!” he shouted. “Get your boys in order and get them back on those walls!” Pushing deeper into the crowd he caught a pair of men by the collars of their gambesons. “Are you going to let the bastards enslave you again!?” he demanded. “Stand and fight, damn you!” Pushing off from them he came across Akhollo, who was almost weeping with rage as he abominated his men in Dothraki for cowards and eunuchs. Gordon buffeted him across the face to get his attention. “Get a hold of yourself, man!” he roared. “Get a hold of yourself and a handle on your men; we need them up that wall!”

“STAND, BROTHERS!” Gordon spun around and saw Septon Jonothor standing like a tower, his crystal raised in his right hand and his face transfigured with passion. “STAND,” Jonothor roared in a voice of thunder, “AND HEAR THE WORDS OF THE GODS!”

The freedmen nearby, already slowed by Gordon and their officers, halted dead in their tracks; others, nearby, slowed to a walk.

Jonothor raised his eyes to the heavens. “Thus sayeth the Father;” he said in a voice that carried even over the surf-pounding of the assault, “he that places chains on a man and enslaveth him enslaveth me, for man is made in my image. Him that would keep faith with me must give no
peace to the slaver, nor show him mercy, but destroy him utterly, and free every man he holds in bondage. Thus sayeth the Warrior:” the freedmen around him were staring at him transfixed, those nearby who had slowed down had stopped. Others further away were slowing. “Thou art my battle axe and my weapons of war. With thee shall I shatter kingdoms; with thee shall I break in pieces the nations. For it is I who lend thee of my strength, that thou mayest overthrow thine enemies, and take their possessions for thy birthright. Thus sayeth the Father:” every freedman within hearing range had stopped by now, and others out of easy earshot were stopping to investigate and crowding around. “Him that seeketh justice, and who giveth of his life for the cause of justice, even though he die, yet shall he live. For I shall take him up and say to him ‘Well done and bravely fought, thou who art great among my children.’ And I shall seat him at my right hand at the feasting table, as a father doth a favorite son, and the Mother shall bless him, and the Warrior greet him as a brother, and the Maiden welcome him as a bridegroom. And on the last day when the living and the dead are judged I shall say unto him, ‘The blood that thou shed for my justice hath washed away thy sin, and thy virtue hath burned evil out of thee, and thou shalt live at my side as a favored son, while the heavens endure.”’

Jonothor glared about him, his eyes blazing with fervor. “These are the words that the Seven-who-are-One say to you, my brothers,” he proclaimed. “And their words are true! Why then do you fear for your lives?! For if you die, then you die as free men, fighting for the Father’s justice, and the delights of Paradise shall be yours! And if you live in triumph, you shall be free, and your children and your children’s children after you shall be free!” He flung his arm out to point at the walls. “There is the enemy!” he bellowed, spit flying. “There are the authors of your grief, the makers of your despair, the begetters of your pain! There are the ones who have taken your freedom, who have blasphemed against the gods! There are the enemies of freedom, of justice, of life! The gods look down upon you and they say, ‘Fight! Strike them down! Slay and spare not among them! As they have done unto you, do unto them sevenfold! This we command, opening the Gates of the Heavens for the fallen!’” The freedmen were stirring, murmurs turning to feral growls. Jonothor threw up his hands, his crystal catching the light in a spray of color. “So go forth!” he thundered. “Go forth and fear not, for the gods watch over you! Go forth and conquer! The gods will it!”

The other septons, standing nearby, threw up their hands also. “The gods will it!” they bawled in chorus. “The gods will it!” The freedmen immediately around them began to take up the chant. “The gods will it! The gods will it!” The chant spread through the crowd of freedmen, building strength like a storm at sea. “The gods will it! The gods will it!” Every freedman in the crowd was shouting now, brandishing weapons. “The gods will it! The gods will it! THE GODS WILL IT!”

Akhollo threw his head back and gave voice to the yipping howl of his war cry. “Forward!” he bellowed, brandishing the sword he had taken from a Pentoshi nobleman. “Free or dead! The gods will it!”

The freedmen surged towards the walls like a mighty wave, bearing their hatred before them like the first wind of a hurricane. Their ladders had been cast down by the Myrmen; a thousand hands raised them up again and freedmen stormed up the ladders with berserk fury in their hearts. The Myrish officers hadn’t expected the freedmen to return from their retreat and so they had sent men to reinforce the sectors attacked by the siege towers; those that remained were submerged by the onset. A tower door was hacked down with axes and the tower bloodily stormed, Myrish crossbowmen pitched off the tower roof to fall sixty feet to the ground, screaming all the way. The integrity of the whole defense was jeopardized.

But the Myrmen had laid plans against such an eventuality. The City Watch had been split into companies of two hundred men and each company had been assigned to a tower as a reserve. If a tower were to be breached, then its company was to immediately reinforce the tower’s defenders and restore the situation. The City Watch were keepers of the peace and enforcers of the law, not
soldiers, but their families were in the city, and they knew that they were the only thing between those families and the horde of slaves and Andals that had sworn to utterly destroy them. So the City Watch of Myr streamed in through the ground-floor door of the tower and up the stairs to the landing just beneath the wall, closed ranks behind their recently issued shields, leveled their spears, and fought as men fight against drowning. The freedmen threw themselves at the wall of spears and shields with the abandon of men who cared not whether they lived or died so long as they slew, but even the transcendent rage that possessed them could not breach that wall of desperate men. The floor of that landing was quickly awash in blood and knee-deep in corpses, but still the deadlock continued.

That death-grapple was broken apart by something that absolutely no-one had expected.

XXX

It had been years and years since the slaves of Myr city had revolted. Partly this was due to the savagery with which the last revolt had been suppressed, but it also had its roots in the reality of how social mores were enforced. In strictest theory, a slave was their master’s property to do with as they pleased, but in practice there were sharp limits on that power. For one thing, no properly behaved Myrish aristocrat, or any who aped their manners, would dream of harming their slaves except as a punishment for wrongdoing; not only was it poor business sense, it simply wasn’t gentlemanly. In much the same way, although female slaves were almost always sexually exploited by their masters, it was the expectation that any resulting children would remain with their mother, who would retain her position in the household, and would become a part of the household themselves when they reached an age to enter service. Furthermore, deliberate and gratuitous cruelty was sharply frowned upon; a true gentleman behaved with appropriate restraint in all situations, especially in the exercise of power over those who had none of their own. In the privacy of the countryside, a master could thumb his nose at this unwritten code of behavior and get away with it, for the most part, but in the city there were many more eyes belonging to interested parties. It was a rare man (or woman for that matter) who would invite social opprobrium by breaking the rules of properly civilized conduct.

This was not to say that the lot of a slave in Myr city was a happy one, of course. Even the best of days came with a hundred little slights and humiliations, all overlaid by the weight of the collar and brand. And such days were few and far between. However, the lack of opportunity to remedy their situation either by fair means or foul, combined with the occasional drastic example of the consequences of failed rebellion, had forced most of the slaves in Myr city to at least bury their anger so deeply under the mask of servility that even they didn’t know it was there.

But things had changed. The slaves had heard the rumors that had come flying down with the north wind. *The Andals come from beyond the sunset to bring freedom. They will break every chain and strike off every shackle. They will break the power of the masters and destroy them utterly. Under their rule there shall be neither slave nor bondsman, but free men and women.* Most of the slaves did not fully believe the rumors, especially the one that had claimed that the coming of the Andals heralded a new age of freedom where all men would be absolutely equal. But they certainly believed the rumor that the Andals meant to destroy slavery; their own masters had said as much, repeatedly and with growing hysteria as they drew ever closer. And judging by the flood of refugees from the countryside, and the news of the great battle, the Andals seemed likely to win. What was more, there was proof that the Andals were serious about destroying slavery.

Slaves in Myr did not carry arms. Exceptions were made for household guards, but they could not wear armor and they were forbidden from carrying any weapon besides clubs or staves. And the use of slaves as household guards had not taken root in Myr as it did in other Free Cities; every house of rank or note had its assortment of bravos whose main duty was to serve as the house’s
defense against anyone inclined to mischief. For the Andals to not only free slaves but give them weapons and training in how to use them was clear proof that they meant what they said about freedom.

So the slaves had begun to lay plans. The initial plot had originated in the shipyards, under the leadership of a slave foreman named Franlan who had originally thought only to prevent that portion of the Myrish fleet that lay at anchor in the harbor from being denied to the liberators. From there it had expanded to the other artisan’s guilds; seven in ten of the guildsmen in Myr were slaves, the property of the master craftsmen who used them as unpaid apprentices and journeymen. Even some domestic slaves had been brought in, despite the fact that these were the most likely to betray their co-conspirators. The plan had been simple. Wait until the masters were sufficiently involved in the fighting on the walls, and then hit them from behind.

When the City Watch marched to reinforce the walls and attempt to retake the captured tower, the slaves had been alerted by a relay of runners and the first sparks had flown. The shipyard slaves had broken out of their barracks and overwhelmed the few men who remained to guard them. Adzes, chisels, and mauls had broken open the barracks of the other artisan-slaves and the rising spread like wildfire. A solid mass of slaves, many of them muscular toughs from the smithies and the slaughterhouses, poured forth from the artisan’s quarter and marched into the neighborhoods inhabited by the magisters and the richer freeborn citizens; before the hour was out whole streets were a chaos of blood as the slaves rampaged through the manses of the rich and slew all who came under their weapons.

At the same time a third player entered the game. By ancient pact, the Red Temple of Myr did not keep a chapter of the Fiery Hand, but they were allowed to train devotees of their faith who aspired to join the Fiery Hand’s ranks in Volantis. At the time of the siege, the Red Temple could command the services of thirty-three fully trained men who were waiting only for a vacancy in the Hand’s ranks, as well as a like number of trainees and older priests who had received training in the past but had decided not to serve their Lord in a militant role. When the siege had begun, High Priest Danikos had brought his congregants into the Temple to protect them and laid plans with his subordinates to intervene in an assault; the Red Faith was tolerated in Myr, but not embraced or particularly honored by many beyond the lower classes and the slaves, and Myrish officialdom looked upon the Lord of Light’s priests and devotees with disfavor. Danikos was sixty-eight years old, and had absorbed many slights and witnessed the oppression of many of his congregants over those years. It was time to pay the debt in blood.

When the slave revolt broke out of the artisan’s quarter, Danikos knew it was time. The gates of the Red Temple opened and Danikos himself led the Red Sword of the Lord of Light onto the streets. As they marched to the walls, chanting a battle-hymn to the God of Flame and Shadow, a growing tail of rebelling slaves grew around them, drawn as much by the disciplined purpose of the R’hllorites as by the belligerence of their hymn.

When they reached the Great Eastern Gate, they paused only to roar “Lord of Light, defend us!” before charging home. The nearby companies of the City Watch, caught in the middle of deploying onto the walls, turned about and tried to form ranks but they were swarmed under and hacked into bloody ruin. Danikos was killed in the first moments of the onset but his second-in-command, a man named Kalarus, took up the leadership instantly and pressed home the attack. The company that had marched into the captured tower was taken from behind by a party of slaves sent by Kalarus under the leadership of a trio of red priests and was massacred to a man. The slaves battered down the tower doors and stormed in with incoherent roars while half a thousand hands lifted the bars holding the Great Eastern Gate shut out of their brackets and hauled back the great leaves.
Lyn Corbray’s Valemen had weathered volley upon volley of crossbow bolts and hails of stones trying to break down the gates and they were now in a fury. Only some very fast talking on Kalaraus’ part and some great good luck prevented them from slaughtering their new-found allies. Lyn, fastening upon the essentials of the situation, seized a horn from his squire and blew as he had never blown before, signaling that the gate was open. Brynden Tully, hearing the horn blasts, sounded his own horn, committing the Sunset Company’s reserves to the fray. The freedmen, inspired by Jonothor’s impromptu sermon, had already stormed for the walls, but there were still just under six hundred men under Brynden’s control, all Riverlanders and many of them men he had recruited himself to join Robert and Eddard in their feud. At the horn-blast from their captain, the Riverlanders advanced, trotting towards and through the gate in a river of steel, their knights at the head of the column led by the Blackfish himself.

Now the true slaughter began. The Myrmens on the walls, cut off and surrounded, were cut down without regard for cries of surrender, which to their credit were few. The soldiers of the Sunset Company streamed off the walls to join their comrades who had come through the gate and together they swarmed into the city, Westerosi and freedmen alike driven equally berserk by the fighting. Streams of soldiers, spearheaded by the Myrish slaves, swarmed into the city, baying like wolves at the sight of wounded prey. The red priests, their mission fulfilled, cut their way back to the Red Temple and resolved to fight off all comers to defend their congregants and their families. The remaining City Watchmen of Myr fought valiantly, but they were too few and the attackers were not to be denied of even the least part of their prize.

Even as the last of the Watch were being slaughtered on the steps of the Palace of Order, the screams were already rising from the city. In just under an hour of brutal fighting the fate of Myr had been sealed, and the gateway was opened to what would later be called the Generation of Blood.
The Storm's Fury

Author's Note: Trigger warning for mentions of sexual assault in the first two parts of this chapter. The city's being sacked under medieval codes of warfare; it's not a pretty sight. Also Ironborn are Ironborn, even when they're on the side of the good guys.

Ser Brynden Tully had been a soldier for almost all his adult life. In those years he had had fought in duels, skirmishes, sieges, and pitched battles. He had thought he had seen much of what men drunk on blood could do.

He had not, however, seen a major city sacked.

This was mostly due to the rarity of such things. The only city to be sacked in Westeros in living memory had been King’s Landing, and Brynden had been several miles away from that mess, although he had seen the aftermath. In the early 200s, the Golden Company had sacked Qohor, but that had also been a rarity; in the normal run of Essosi warfare, cities were not themselves directly sieged. And in most successful sieges, the defenders surrendered on terms, which tended to include the prohibition of a general sack.

So when Brynden took responsibility for trying to police the sack, he quickly found himself facing the toughest job he had ever undertaken. If he hadn’t managed to keep a hundred of his knights and their squires under his control and sober, bribed by the promise of double shares and a division of Brynden’s own share, it would have been impossible.

“The docks are secure!” one of those knights was yelling in Brynden’s ear over the clamor. “Lord Stark’s Northmen have linked up with the slaves there. Most of the Northmen have gone off looting, but Lord Stark and his household men have joined the cordon.”

Brynden nodded, gentling his horse as it shifted underneath him at the commotion. “How many ships are docked?” he yelled back, closing his mind to the rhythmic screams coming from the manse across the street.

“Twenty galleys and dromonds that I could see,” the knight shouted. “Whole mess of cogs and hulks also. Lord Stark said he had them well in hand, so long as no fires started.”

Brynden winced; the thought of a fire reaching the docks and the shipyards, with their stores of seasoned timber, pitch, oakum, sailcloth, tar, and ropes, was terrifying. He turned in the saddle. “Ser Mychel!” he called, waving his arm, and Ser Mychel Charlton trotted up. “Take forty men and patrol the docksides streets until relieved. Any man starting fires is subject to summary execution, on my authority.” Ser Mychel clanked his gauntleted fist off his breastplate in salute and clattered off with his score of knights close behind. Brynden turned to his next lieutenant, Ser Harrold Grey. “Ser Harrold, take forty men and patrol from here,” Brynden indicated the street they were located on, which seemed to be the dividing line between the artisan’s quarter and the magister’s quarter, “out to the northern wall. Your focus is to protect the market squares; don’t try and prevent looting, but keep them from being completely destroyed. Again, any man starting fires is subject to summary execution, on my authority.” Myr had been taken by storm, which meant that the company could do whatever they liked with the people and the movable property, but even sacks had rules, the main one being that arson was strictly forbidden. For one thing, the immovable property of the captured city now belonged to Robert as the company’s commander. For another,
burning down a city with the company inside it would be even more catastrophic than a repulse would have been.

Ser Harrold frowned. “Forty men is pretty few to try and hold the market squares,” he said dubiously.

“Which is why I don’t expect you to hold them,” Brynden replied. “They don’t have to be pristine, just not destroyed.”

Ser Harrold nodded, saluted, and trotted away with his forty men. Brynden knew that Harrold would have a difficult time, but it should get easier. For one thing, the sack was only an hour old; once the men got their hands on the city’s supplies of drink, increasing intoxication would render them less physically capable of violence, if more easily disposed to it. For another, Brynden wasn’t asking him to try and restrain the men from all misdeeds, simply from firesetting.

Brynden knew enough about soldiers to know that a sack, once started, could not be controlled. It could only be ridden out.

Which was why, when the half-naked girl ran screaming down the street with a trio of soldiers, one Northman and two freedmen by the look of them, in hot pursuit, Brynden made no move to intervene. His duty was to prevent the burning of the city and protect vital installations, not keep every woman in the city from being raped. In any case, he simply didn’t have enough men to do it. He had sent Ser Mychel and his forty to the dockside streets, Ser Harrold and his forty to the northern sector markets, and he had eighty men protecting the crossbow manufactory and the two largest armorer’s shops in the artisan’s quarter. That left him only forty men to help the red priests protect the people who had taken refuge in their temple and serve as a central reserve. Eddard had the docks in hand, Robert was in the artisan’s quarter keeping the crossbow manufactory under guard, Lyn Corbray had joined his troops in looting by all accounts, and Victarion and Akhollo were leading the pillage in the Palace of Order. Aside from the men under Brynden’s command, there were no men-at-arms under discipline in the whole city.

So Brynden closed his ears to the screams and waited for his lieutenants to send him progress reports by galloper. There was nothing else to do.

XXX

The Palace of Order had been the seat of Myrish governance for centuries. Within its halls the Conclave had met in council, alliances and treaties had been ratified, laws had been passed, and the city-states judges had presided over the enforcement of law and order. During those years, the Palace of Order had seen its share of parties; restrained, sober, and elegant parties, these, where the wealthy and the powerful mixed with their peers, to see and be seen.

The Ironborn had different ideas of what a good party was like.

The Sack of Myr was a day old, and although the first rush of savagery had largely spent itself, the army was not yet done with its carnival of officially sanctioned lawlessness. There were a few holdouts of order, mainly around the Red Temple where Brynden Tully had placed his banner and around the docks, where Eddard Stark was ruthlessly enforcing sobriety and discipline. But the rest of the city was a pandemonium of drunkenness, looting, rape, and murder. One of the few islands of relative stability was the Palace of Order, where the freedmen of the company and the Ironborn had a boast to fulfill, in which they allowed certain men who had proved their valor to their satisfaction to join. The other captains had been invited to join the revels, but they had refused. Robert and Eddard were hammering out terms with Foreman Franlan, who had led the shipyard slaves in the initial revolt, Jaime was putting his feet up in the manse that Rhaegar Targaryen had
occupied, and Lyn had begged off as being busy overseeing his men at plunder.

Not that the Ironborn, the freedmen, and their accomplices strictly needed the captains to be present; they had things well in hand. Every hour parties striking out into the rest of the city came back with more wine, more beer, more food, and more women to sate the appetites of conquerors. The cells that had held miscreants awaiting judgement became holding pens for the women, who were routinely dragged off to be raped. The rooms where judges had pronounced on questions of law became storerooms for looted treasure and brothels were the captured women were violated. The hallways were filled with soldiers shouting drunken plaudits and vows of brotherhood to each other over the screams and quaffing wine by the gallon. And in the chamber where Rhaegar Targaryen and the Conclave had received the Sunset Company’s letters at the start of the campaign, the officers held court.

Victarion Greyjoy leaned his chair back on its rear legs, resting his booted feet on the table as he held a bottle of wine in one hand and a young woman of Myr under his arm. His armor had been stripped off, save for his arming coat and vambraces, and rested on the floor behind him along with his axe. Around the table, in similar condition, were Dagmer Cleftjaw, Ser Harras Harlaw, and Akhollo, who was currently standing on the table and chanting a riding song in Dothraki to the cheers of the other officers and the hangers-on who also filled the room. The young woman under Victarion’s arm, barely seventeen and stark naked save for bruises, scratches, and her waist-length seal-brown hair, huddled by the man who had claimed her as a prize of war; if Victarion was brutal and unthinking in his lust at least he was not deliberately cruel. She had seen and heard the women who had fallen into the hands of the freedmen, and her mind shrank from the fresh memories. If the other men around her cast leering eyes her way, none dared to try and steal the prize of their captain.

Akhollo finished his song to thundering applause and flung up his hands for quiet, which came reluctantly. “Brothers!” he cried, his vocabulary improved over the months but his accent still thick, and more so from drink. “We are men!” There were shouts of acclamation from the onlookers and men beat their fists against the table. “But we have not a name,” Akhollo said slurringly, “not a name as our Andal and Ironborn brothers do! We must take one!” At the shouts of agreement Akhollo threw his arms wide. “Come, come,” he said expansively, “suggest names! I welcome all ideas!”

“The Unshackled!” cried a bulky freedman wearing a judge’s hat at a jaunty angle.

“The Freed Ones!” called an Ironborn with his fingers twisted in a Myrish girl’s hair.

“The Sons of Liberty!” yelled a freedman with a tankard in one hand and a joint of mutton in the other.

“The Chainbreakers!” hollered a Westerman with a Myrish girl under each arm.

Ser Harras Harlaw disentangled himself from the girl under his arm and leaped onto the table. “The Iron Legion!” he bellowed, drowning out all others. “The Ghiscari claim their legions are the finest foot in the world,” Harras said, taking a wide-legged stance on the table, “but could their legions have rallied and taken the walls as our brothers have done?” Boos and catcalls filled the air with derision. “I say nay!” Harras answered his own question. “Our brothers have shown that they are men with iron in their souls, as we are, and they must have a name that shows it! A name that shows that they have paid the iron price for it! And if the iron legions of New Ghis object to having their name stolen,” Harras spread his hands extravagantly, not caring for the wine that spilled from his goblet, “then they are welcome to come and take it back, if they can!”

Predatory laughs ran through the crowd of revelers as Akhollo nodded and raised his hands again.
“What say you, my brothers who are blood of my blood!” he shouted. “Shall we call ourselves the Iron Legion?”

“Aye!” the freedmen in the chamber roared back raising their drinking vessels in salute. “Aye! AYE!”

XXX

Septon Jonothor rose from the cot, tucked his much-thumbed copy of The Seven-Pointed Star under his arm, and signed the seven-pointed star over the Stormlander. “Gods watch over you,” he said softly, and stepped away to move on to the next.

The assault on the walls and the gate had produced heavy casualties. The Sunset Company had numbered just under eight thousand men when they had launched the assault, and in taking the city they had suffered just over six hundred men killed and around a thousand wounded. The wounded, for the most part, had fallen into three categories. First, there were the men who were only lightly wounded and were fit for light duties after being stitched and bandaged. The next group was those men whose wounds were serious to put them off their feet for days or sennights, thanks to minor broken bones, moderate slash or stab wounds, or light scalds by the boiling water and tallow that had been poured over the battering ram, but whose lives would be saved by medical treatment. The third group was the men whom Jonothor was walking among.

These were the men who had been placed in the hands of the gods. The company had only one maester with any training in the healing arts, and Maester Antony had nowhere near the resources necessary to treat a thousand wounded men with only a handful of assistants, and in any case the majority of their attention was reserved for the highborn wounded and their household men. So men who had suffered serious broken bones, serious slash or stab wounds, and serious scalds had been carried into this room, which had once been the main guildhall of the Weaver’s Guild, and left to recover as they might or die, as the gods decreed. As these were the men most in need of divine succor, it was here that Jonothor was spending the sack; in the past two and a half days he had had only seven hours of sleep. Nor had he eaten more than morsels snatched at random, although given the smell of the wound rot that was starting to set in, that might be for the better. The other septons of the company were also gliding around the room giving what aid and comfort they could, either through prayer or through what medical knowledge they had picked up over the years; the maesters claimed a monopoly on healing, but every septon knew how to dress a wound, wrap a tourniquet, and splint a fracture, in the event that they found a parishioner in need.

He went to the next bed down, where a Northman was lying with a broken skull; a rock thrown from one of the towers had struck him on the helmet and he hadn’t awoken since. Jonothor knelt by the bedside, felt for a pulse at the man’s neck, and found none.

His surcoat was unadorned, bore no heraldry. Jonothor turned to the Stormlander he had just visited. “Your pardon, my son,” he asked, “but do you know who this man serves?”

The Stormlander, both his legs broken, lifted himself up on his elbows. “No idea, father,” he said with a shake of his head. “Never seen him before he was brought in here. Lot of big Northmen carried him in, didn’t have any heraldry on them. Sorry.”

Jonothor nodded. “Think not of it, son,” he said with a reassuring wave. As the Stormlander sank back on his pallet, Jonothor was thinking furiously. Under the laws of the Faith, any man could receive the blessing of the gods. That said, what was needed here was not a simple blessing but a prayer for the commendation of the dead to the care of the gods, and that Jonothor could not give him; under the laws of the Faith, only the Faithful could enter the Seven Heavens and dwell in the
light of the gods. The Northman could be a Manderly man and hence a worshipper of the Seven, but those were long odds and Jonothor doubted that the Most Devout would look kindly on such a guess.

On the other hand, this Northman had fought valiantly in a cause blessed by the Seven and given his life for that cause. If that cause had not, strictly speaking, been his, then that made his sacrifice all the greater. Either way, Jonothor reminded himself, the salient point was that here was a man who had fought as valiantly, suffered as greatly, and died as dead as any of the Faithful of the company.

Out upon it, he thought finally, having ruminated over the problem for half an hour. What will the Most Devout do, banish me? They’ve done that already. He placed his hand lightly on the Northman’s face. “Oh gods,” he said softly, “here lies one who fought valiantly and gave his life for a cause dear to your hearts, though he knew you not. Let not his lack of faith in you make him unworthy in your sight, we pray. Judge him justly, Father. Be merciful, Mother. Greet him as a cousin, Warrior. Welcome him as a friend, Maiden. Grant him strength, Smith. Light his way, Crone. Guide him well, Stranger. Let not the Gates of the Heavens be closed to him for his lack of belief in you, but let perpetual light shine upon him and grant him peace. This we ask in your names, almighty gods.”

Jonothor stood and glanced at the Stormlander, who was looking at him in shock. “He who pays the price deserves the reward,” he said firmly. “On my head be the consequences.” He walked to the next bed over, this one containing a Westerman with a crushed shoulder. There were more than three hundred men in this ward, and his duty was to provide what aid and comfort he could to all of them.

XXX

The Sack of Myr lasted four days before order was restored. The Myrish aristocracy was all but wiped out, while the merchant class was also severely reduced; the first accurate census after the Sack, conducted just over two years later, records barely a quarter of the merchant families on the census rolls before the Sack. Fortunately, although a few buildings were burned (largely to smoke out diehard resisters) the destruction of structures was limited. Also, the craftsfolk of Myr, many of them born slaves, were less affected by the Sack; indeed, many of them joined the Sunset Company and the freedmen in the general mayhem. One letter that survives in the archives of the Great Sept, written to the Most Devout by Septon Jonothor, who was the chaplain to the Stormlanders of the Company in those days, described the Myrish slaves as being “incredibly savage in their vengeance. Neither age, sex, nor condition was shown mercy, but instead were destroyed utterly, and often with great cruelty.”

Despite being abhorrent by modern standards, and regarded in much recent scholarship as a black mark on the Sunset Company’s record, it is unsound to view historical events and actors through the prism of modern morality. Under the laws of war as they existed at the time, the Company was perfectly justified in sacking Myr, as they had taken it by storm after it had resisted them. Furthermore, for the common soldiers of the Company, and for any army of the time, wages were so low and so irregularly paid that they relied on plunder to survive, much less to benefit from their military service. Only the Iron Bank of Braavos could afford to regularly pay an army for any length of time and even then the armies they could pay were not very large. The contract under which the Company conquered Pentos on Braavos’ behalf was very much an anomaly in the Narrow Sea world of the late two hundreds and early three hundreds.

- Chasing Dragons: The Sunset Company Reexamined by Maester Hendricus, published 1539 AC
Long Live the King

A sennight after the Sack had ended, the city of Myr was more or less restored. Those buildings that had been burned had yet to be replaced and the subsequent gaps in the streetfronts stood out like missing teeth in a jaw, but the bodies had been burned or dumped in the harbor, the bloodstains had been washed away, and at least some of the damage to buildings had been patched up. There was still much to do before the city was restored to its former prosperity.

But today that work was halted, for today was a day of great ceremony. The soldiery that had sacked the city and then put it back in order now stood at attention on the Street of Magisters, the great thoroughfare that led from the Great Eastern Gate to the Palace of Order and presented arms as the procession marched past them under a cloudy sky.

First came a score of men from the Iron Legion, who had claimed the right to lead the parade on account of their being the first to successfully breach the walls. The front rank of ten men carried spear, shield, and shortsword, while the second rank carried a crossbow each at slope arms. Their marching was somewhat ragged, but each man walked proudly with a triumphant gleam in his eye.

Behind them came three horsemen, carrying the banners. Ser Lyle Crakehall rode in the center, bearing the sunset sky and impaled dragon’s-head of the Sunset Company. On his right rode Ser Brus Buckler, carrying the crowned stag, black on yellow, of the Baratheons. On the left was Captain Akhollo of the freedmen. The former slave was still re-learning how to ride, but he had refused to do anything else and so he rode carrying the new standard of the Iron Legion, a red chain being broken by a black spear on a field of cloth-of-gold looted from the stores of the Weaver’s Guild. The freedmen lining the processional route cheered themselves hoarse as the banners went by and Akhollo was bright-eyed with pride and joy.

Behind the banners, and riding alone on his massive charger, came Robert Baratheon. He was in full armor save for his antlered helmet. In his right hand he held his great hammer, the pommel resting on his hip, and the breeze made the yellow and black cloak fastened at his neck with a simple brooch of unadorned silver flutter at the flanks of his horse. Robert had stoutly resisted making “any stuff and fuss” about his coronation, but long argument had worn him down, and now he was determined to play his part with appropriate gravity.

Behind him came his five captains, also in full armor save for their helmets. Ser Lyn Corbray, his sharp-featured handsomeness almost cruel. Ser Brynden Tully, his craggy face calmly purposeful. Victarion Greyjoy, self-consciously grave as only the young can be. Ser Jaime Lannister, smiling so broadly his face seemed like to split. And on the right, in the place of honor, Eddard Stark, his solemn face set in the fashion of a man faced with great ceremony and determined to do it properly.

Bringing up the rear were seven knights representing each of the contingents who had followed Robert in the conquest of the city. Ser Gerion Lannister of the Westerlands, Ser Willam ‘Silveraxe’ Fell of the Stormlands, Ser Mychel Egen of the Vale, Ser Harrold Grey of the Riverlands, Ser Wendel Manderly of the North, Ser Colin Dunn of the Reach, and Ser Harras Harlaw of the Ironborn, all fully armored and carrying lances streaming with pennons.

Eventually the procession came to the great square before the Palace of Order, with the great steps leading up to the doors of the Palace. At the top of those stairs was the chair that had been used by
the Gonfalonier of the Conclave and that had been appropriated by Rhaegar Targaryen during his undeclared rule, while at the base of the steps was Septon Jonothor, wearing his plain robes; more elaborate vestments had been found but he had flatly refused them. He was a septon, he had said, not a mummer. Beside him stood High Priest Kalarus of the Red Temple, a stern-faced fireplug of a man whose brocaded formal robes looked out of place on him, like a gown on a prizefighter.

“Who comes?” asked Jonothor in a voice pitched to carry across the square and into the streets around it, where heralds would relay his words to the crowd.

“It is Robert, of House Baratheon, who comes,” answered Ser Brus Buckler.

“Why has he come to this place at this hour?” asked Kalarus, following the script that he, Jonothor, Maester Gordon, and Maester Antony had devised for the ceremony two days ago.

“He comes to be crowned King of Myr, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Faiths, and Shield of Freedom,” answered Ser Lyle Crakehall.

“By what right does he claim the title of King?” asked Kalarus.

Akhollo lifted his chin. “By right of conquest,” he answered, speaking carefully through his thick accent, “for he has conquered Myr, and claims it as his lawful prize.”

Jonothor and Kalarus raised their hands and addressed the crowd. “People of Myr!” they proclaimed. “We here present to you Robert of House Baratheon. Is it your will to take him as your king, your captain, and your judge, professing homage, faith, and allegiance to him and his heirs after him, for so long as his line endures?”

The acclamation was thunderous, as more than ten thousand people roared their approval, and the soldiers drummed the butts of their polearms against the ground like hailstones.

Jonothor and Kalarus lowered their hands and turned back to the procession. “Approach, Robert of House Baratheon.” Robert dropped his reins onto the neck of his horse, swung his leg over the pommel of his saddle, and slid to the ground with a clank of armor. As the freedmen and the standard bearers moved aside and the captains dismounted, he strode forward, his hammer still resting on his hip, until he stood before Septon Jonothor. He knelt, and lowered his hammer to the ground, looking the Septon and the High Priest in the face.

“Robert of House Baratheon,” Septon Jonothor intoned, “is it your will to be crowned king?”

“It is,” Robert answered, his voice solemn for once in his life.

“Do you swear to uphold the rights and liberties of your people, and to defend them against all their enemies, wheresoever they may arise?”

“I swear.”

“Do you swear to cause law and justice to be executed in all your judgements, tempered with mercy, as you would have the Father judge you?”

“I swear.”

“Do you swear to protect the several faiths of all your peoples, to uphold the rights of their clergy, and to defend their sacred things and holy places as you would defend your own?”

“I swear.” The Northmen and the Rhllorites in the crowd rumbled approval. They knew that
Eddard and High Priest Kalarus had insisted on that particular oath being inserted into the ceremony, as a hedge against the future.

“Do you swear to especially abhor the evil of slavery, to forbid it in your realm, and to wage war without mercy upon it wheresoever it may be found?”

“I swear.” The freedmen gave a short shout of approval, like the bark of some immense hound, and beat spear and pike butts against the ground in a dull thunderclap.

“The gods have seen fit to give you the throne, Robert of House Baratheon, and assume your throne.” Jonothor and Kalarus turned and led Robert up the stairs, Jonothor chanting a psalm to the Seven which was taken up by the Seven-worshippers in the crowd; Kalarus sang a hymn to the Lord of Light that was likewise taken up by the Red God’s devotees. At last, Robert reached the throne and seated himself in it, while Septon Jonothor took the crown, a simple, unadorned circlet of hammered gold, and raised it high. “I crown thee, Robert of House Baratheon, King of Myr, Protector of the Realm, Defender of the Faiths, and Shield of Freedom,” he intoned, lowering the crown onto Robert’s head. Lifting his hands away and turning to the square Jonothor and Kalarus lifted up their voices. “People of Myr!” they roared. “Behold your king!

Every person in the square knelt, even the Iron Legion, who had reserved the right to stand in every circumstance save this. “Long live the King!” they thundered in a chorus that made birds take to the air and rattled windows in their frames. “Long live the King! Long live the King!”

XXX

Eddard Stark strode through what had been the Palace of Order and was now the Palace of Justice. The revels that had turned it into a combined brothel and tavern of disorder had left it a proper mess, but the last of the clutter was being swept up and carted out, and the offices of the Myrish judges had been restored to some semblance of order as the offices of the Kingdom of Myr’s civil service. The statues and paintings and tapestries that had decorated the corridors had been either destroyed or stolen by the soldiers that had occupied it, leaving it pleasingly austere to Eddard’s eye, although it retained its grandiose façade and overpoweringly cavernous entrance hall.

Fortunately, the Palace’s store of parchment, ink, and quills had been largely spared by the rampaging soldiery, although it had apparently taken hours to gather up all the quills that had been thrown into the air. The ledger books had been strewn about the place in various states of damage, but those that had remained intact were being scraped clean and repurposed. In short, all the necessary tools of government were present and in order. All that was missing was a government.

And it fell to Eddard to fill the gap. As Hand of the King, an appointment so recent that he didn’t even have a badge of office yet, Eddard was responsible for the government of the new Kingdom of Myr in the King’s absence, and Robert had been called away from the city. Eddard had argued bitterly against it, but Robert had been adamant. “The people need to see me, Ned,” Robert had explained, pointing out the window at the city, and the country beyond Myr’s walls. “We’re going to ask them to bend the knee to us, and eventually to fight and die for us. They won’t do that for a stranger. They need to see that we’re different from the magisters, that we deserve to be followed as the magisters don’t.”

Eddard had asked to go along, in order to hone his skills, but Robert had refused him. For one thing, as he pointed out, to have both the King and the Hand going on the same progress defeated the purpose of the King having a Hand in the first place. For another, as Robert had said in private, Eddard was the only man he trusted enough to take command in his absence. And in any case, Robert had added with a smile, it wasn’t as if he was taking all of the best swords with him; Eddard would have plenty of good men to practice his sword-craft against in the time he could spare from
restoring the city and forming the government of the new kingdom.

So Robert had taken two thousand foot and eight hundred horse, with Lyn, Jaime, Akhollo, and Maester Gordon as his lieutenants, and embarked on a progress that was to carry him through his new lands. First he was going south to the town of Sirmium, which Eddard understood to be the southern districts’ equivalent to Ceralia in the north. Eight hundred infantry and four hundred cavalry would be left there under Lyn’s command as Warden of the Southern Marches, with a charge to bring the southern provinces under the King’s Peace, defend them against Lyseni or Tyroshi incursions and launch reprisal raids in the event of provocation. Eddard could only hope that Lyn would find it a sufficient force; to spare even that much was to strip the trained garrison of Myr city to a minimum, and raising and training new companies of the Iron Legion from the freedmen would take time and resources that were likely to be rare. And if he was any judge, the Lyseni and the Tyroshi would start to probe the frontier sooner rather than later.

From Sirmium, the progress would turn northeast and make for the town of Campora, where Ser Brus Buckler would be installed as Warden of the Eastern Marches with four hundred foot and one hundred horse and the same mandate as Lyn did; the hope was that, given the distance between the new kingdom’s eastern border and the zone of Volantene control, Ser Brus would have an easier job than Lyn despite his fewer resources. From Campora, the progress would proceed to Ceralia, link up with the garrison that had been left there under the command of Ser Richard Shermer, who had been a bored officer of the Oldtown City Watch before he joined the company and lost a hand at Tara, and then proceed down the Great North Road to return to Myr. Along the way he would be collecting information on the state of the kingdom’s lands and the ownership thereof, with a view to laying the groundwork for a proper cadastral survey and eventually granting lands to those of the company who merited them.

The whole journey was likely to take several months, barring delays, and while it was going on Eddard was expected to finish the restoration and repair of Myr city, form a government almost entirely from scratch, and generally exercise the right to bind and loose in the name of King Robert, the First of His Name, etc., etc.

It was a daunting proposition. Eddard had one fully qualified maester in the person of Grand Maester Antony, whose specialty was in healing not administration. He had Ser Brynden Tully, the newly named Master of Soldiers, to command the garrison and oversee the raising, training and organization of the Royal Army. He had Victarion Greyjoy, the new Master of Ships, for the next four days before he and his fellow Ironborn set off up the coastal road towards Pentos to retrieve the longships that the Ironborn had left at Mytila, pacifying the coastal lands as he went. He had Ser Wendel Manderly for Master of Coin, the which office he had gained thanks to having received some tutelage in the art of finance from his father, who was the richest lord in the North aside from the Starks. He had Ser Gerion Lannister as Master of Whispers, who held his office thanks to the contacts he had developed on his previous travels around the Narrow Sea. He had Ser Mychel Egen, who as Master of Law was charged with keeping order within the city and developing the legal code of the new kingdom. He had Franlan Shipwright, the newly-created Lord Captain of the Port, who had authority over all matters pertaining to the safety and good order of the harbor, the building and maintenance of ships, and the policing of the harborside districts in the name of His Grace King Robert.

What he didn’t have was a large body of men who were literate and numerate. Literacy was rare among the smallfolk in Westeros and in Myr it had been against the law to teach slaves to read except as necessary to carry out their duties. Those with noble blood tended to be more literate, but the second and third sons who had followed the Sunset Company to Essos were rarely more literate than was required to read or write a letter; the path to fame and fortune, for such men, was through the use of sword and lance, not of quill and ink. There had been a substantial number of scribe-
slaves in Myr, but many of them had been targeted during the Sack as accomplices of the magisters who had relied on them to, among other things, draw up bills of sale and keep records of which slave belonged to which master. The survivors were almost pathetically eager to offer their services in the hopes of gaining protection, but there weren’t enough of them to form even half of a civil service.

Nor did he have a legal framework to operate within, he reflected as he entered what had been the office of the Gonfalonier of the Conclave and was now the office of the Hand of the King. Clearly the laws of Myr could not stand; the institution of slavery was too tightly woven into them to be allowed. Nor, Eddard knew, could the laws of Westeros be imported in their entirety. Those laws had been made for a different people in a different land under different circumstances. What was needed was an entirely new code of laws to govern the new realm, one that took the best laws of Westeros and the best laws of Myr and forged them into a new creation.

All things considered, he thought as he surveyed his new domain, it was a good thing that he had sent word to the Citadel asking for them to dispatch as many maesters as they could. He, and the new kingdom, would sorely need them.

XXX

The exiled Westerosi stood in ranks before the pyre that had been built on the sea-strand just outside the city of Volantis. On one side stood the sailors of the Royal Fleet, arrayed by ship’s companies with their captains at their head. On the other were the knights and men-at-arms who had followed the Targaryens into exile, with their swords drawn and held before them in salute, catching the rays of the setting sun like slivers of fire.

Standing before them, halfway between the men and the pyre, were the captains of the exiles. Ser Gyles Rambton, his sea-weathered face mournful as an old hound’s. Ser Marq Grafton, stoically unreadable. Ser Arthur Dayne, who was not weeping only because he had exhausted his tears. Ser Barristan Selmy, his square face somber. Magister Rahtheon, downcast as if he were burying his own son, while behind him his daughter Praela wept openly. And, in the middle of them all, was Viserys Targaryen, his round child’s face composed except for the trembling lower lip that he couldn’t quite conceal and dressed all in plain black except for the three-headed dragon embroidered in crimson thread on the front of this tunic.

On the pyre itself rested Rhaegar, the First of His Name, King of Myr, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm. He had died the day before, barely four hours after the exiles had landed in Volantis and taken up residence in one of the five warehouses along the Volantene waterfront that Magister Rahtheon partly owned. In King’s Landing the Silent Sisters would have embalmed his corpse and he would have lain in state in the Great Sept for seven times seven days before his body was given to the flames with as many of the great lords of the realm as could be gathered in attendance and the High Septon leading the service assisted by the Most Devout. But there were no Silent Sisters in Volantis, and aside from the exiles there were barely two thousand people present. Most of them were Volantene smallfolk and merchants come to gawk at the foreigners, but there were a pair of noblemen from the Old Blood of Volantis and their retinues, old trading partners of Rahtheon’s who attended out of respect for their partner. And instead of the High Septon and the Most Devout there was only the Royal Fleet’s chaplain, a rotund old man who said the funeral service in a quavering voice that not even the most generous listener could call dignified.

Ser Arthur Dayne, his heart burning with dull anger that the finest scion of House Targaryen should be commended to the gods in such a paltry state as this, stepped forward as the septon gave the final blessing and lowered his crystal, with the other captains and their prince following him.
As one man they lowered the torches they each held in their hands and thrust them into the pyre, which caught light with a gratifying speed as the flames fastened onto the oil-drenched wood. As the smoke and the overcooked-pork scent of burning flesh began to rise, the captains stepped back and drew their own swords, holding them at the salute as their king was carried home to the gods on fiery wings.

As the flames began to die, Ser Arthur sheathed Dawn, provoking a manifold rush of steel hissing against wood and leather as just over five hundred swords were sheathed. “The King is dead!” Ser Arthur shouted over the crackle-and-pop of the still-burning wood. He turned to Viserys, who was now looking at him with an expression of mingled grief and mild fear on his face. “Long live the King!” Ser Arthur shouted, and bent the knee, inciting a rush of rustling and clanking as two and a half thousand men, the last followers of House Targaryen, knelt before His Grace, Viserys the Third of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm.

“For the King!” they roared. “Long live the King! Long live the King!”
Meanwhile, and over the next several months, in Westeros . . .

The lords who had assembled in King Stannis’ tent rose and bowed as the King walked in. Stannis still had a bruise down one side of his face where an Uller man’s mace had caught him a glancing blow on the visor, but otherwise he looked as fresh as any man could be expected to only two days after their first battle.

His captains were in a similar state. The sling holding Lord Abram Gaunt’s left arm and the row of stitches on Lord Trebor Jordayne’s face were the most obvious tokens of the battle, but all the lords and knights present had their share of the scrapes, bruises, and cuts that were an inescapable side-effect of fighting for one’s life.

“My lords,” Stannis began, still standing. “Before we begin I must thank you all again for the good service you did me and my house in the recent battle. Your valor and prowess will be remembered.” As he sat down, allowing the other lords to sit as well, he continued. “The purpose of this meeting is to determine exactly what took place during the battle, what we did well, and what we can do better next time. I wish to make it clear,” Stannis swept the table with a level stare, “that I expect complete honesty from you all, about your own actions as much as the actions of others. No man will be punished for admitting to fault here, nor will any man be punished based solely on any evidence presented here.” As the lords nodded, some willingly and others reluctantly, he sat back in his chair. “I believe we all agree, my lords, that we owe a great debt to our friends of Dorne and their outriders. But for their scouting, we would not have known that the Red Viper would attempt an ambush.”

“Aye,” said Bronze Yohn Royce, who commanded the Valemen with his lieutenant, Ser Symond Templeton. “And that made all the difference. If we hadn’t known that ambush was coming, we’d have been pushed into the river.”

“Like as not,” agreed Gulian Swann, who commanded the Stormlanders. “As it was we were ready for them, and we were able to turn and face them before they could get into us.”

Gulian’s lieutenant, Ralph Buckler, raised a finger. “I noticed that the rebels opposing us seemed too few to make a serious attack,” he noted. “If we had tried to simply turn back along our line of march and cut our way out, there wouldn’t have been enough of them to stop us.”

“I noticed as much at the front of the column,” said Jason Mallister, who commanded the Riverlanders. “If we had tried to push on towards Sunspear, we could have cut our way through them without too much difficulty.”

“Until they came at our rear, anyway,” Ser Stevron Frey noted dourly. “Nothing more excited than a Dornishman trying to take someone from behind.”

“But of course,” said urbane Trebor Jordayne, second-in-command of the loyal Dornish. “That way we can have all the fun of taking you without having to look at your ugly faces.” A round of chuckles from around the table awarded the point to Trebor, while Stevron flushed. “And making only light attacks on our rear and vanguard may have been deliberate,” the Dornish lord went on. “If the rebel had succeeded in overwhelming our center, then the rearguard and vanguard would have been isolated from each other and would have to retreat in different directions along the line.
of the river. In that case, he could have turned upon each at leisure and devoured them without them being able to come to each other’s support.”

“I agree,” said Anders Yronwood. “It makes good tactical sense, if you’re sure that your army can pull it off.”

“I thought he was attacking us unusually hard,” said Abram Gaunt, who held command of the Royal Brigade. “Came at us like a tidal wave. Fortunately our foot was able to brace themselves or we’d have been run over.” The grizzled old lord hesitated, and then stood and looked at Stannis. “I owe you an apology, Your Grace. When you ordered that the lords and knights of the Royal Brigade fight dismounted I obeyed because you ordered it, not because I agreed with you. If we hadn’t had their leadership among the foot, they would likely have broken. You were right and I was wrong.” Abram bowed shortly.

Stannis nodded in reply. “Think nothing of it, my lord,” he replied. “You obeyed, and that is the important part. I will not hold a man’s reservations against him, so long as he obeys orders.” He leaned forward. “In fact, I must commend you, my lord, for the valor you showed in the shield-wall. The integrity of the line owed much to your skill and your example.” The other lords rapped their knuckles on the light travelling table in applause as Abram flushed in pleased embarrassment. “So,” Stannis continued. “The rebel made holding attacks against our right and left, allowing them routes of retreat that would have proved disadvantageous, and made his main effort against our center. I must conclude that his primary target was me.”

“I agree, Your Grace,” said Anders. “If Oberyn had killed or captured you, he could have won his rebellion then and there. I beg Your Grace’s pardon, but I think we all can guess what would have happened in the aftermath.” There was a moment of silence as those present contemplated a future without Stannis, even if the Royal Army had managed to fight its way out of Dorne. Every lord jockeying for position, Tywin Lannister calling his banners to protect the reign of his grandson against all comers, the Dornish allowed to break away from the Realm as the royal government slowed to a crawl, and the peace of the Realm hanging on the statecraft and wisdom of Jon Arryn and the breath of a baby still at the breast.

“Gods be thanked it did not come to pass,” said Ser Wyllam Nayland, the Royal Castellan of Rosby and second-in-command of the Royal Brigade.

“The gods and the spearmen of the Royal Brigade,” said Ser Cortnay Penrose. “The rebel must have been supremely confident trying to attack formed heavy infantry with Dornish cavalry.” Dornish horsemen almost uniformly were a weight class or two below Reacher and Stormland knights, courtesy of their warmer climate and lighter horses; even on the Marches the average Dornish knight was closer in equipment to a Northern heavy cavalryman than a proper knight.

“So our center repelled them,” said Stevron, “And then the order came to counterattack.” He glanced at Stannis. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but that order was premature. The center had repulsed their enemies but we on the right were still stuck in with them; we couldn’t advance.”

“Likewise on the left,” said Ralph Buckler. “Those Greenblood men might have been levies, but they fought like wolves.”

Stannis nodded. “The order to counterattack was ill-advised; I admit it,” he said. “When the center advanced without the flanks advancing alongside it we became exposed on either side, at which point they turned inward and began to collapse on us. And then the rebel charged our front again and broke through them.”

“That was the dangerous part, right there,” said Wyllam. “If we hadn’t had the Stormguard
backing us up, that breakthrough in the front would have been a lot worse. Speaking of which, I need to commend one of my knights to Your Grace. Ser Harry Flash was commanding the platoon just to the right of the breach. When it was forced open he and his sergeant stepped into it and managed to keep the Dornishmen to a trickle until the Stormguard were able to plug the gap. Killed four Uller men himself, easy as breathing, according to his sergeant.”

Stannis nodded. “I will arrange some suitable reward,” he said. “I must also thank my Stormguard,” he added, turning to Cortnay. “They handled the breakthrough splendidly. I am told that one of the men who was killed in that clash was Lord Uller himself.”

Trebor nodded. “I saw the body and it was old Harmen alright,” he said. “I’d know his face anywhere, even with a lance-point through it.”

“And also His Grace comported himself well during the fighting,” said Stevron, a tone of fawningness creeping into his voice.

Stannis arched an eyebrow. “How would you know, when you weren’t there to see?” he asked pointedly. After making Stevron wilt a little under his cool stare, Stannis had mercy on him and shrugged. “I comported myself well enough,” he said, “but the brunt of the fighting was borne by my Stormguard, and borne well. I will not steal credit from men who deserve it more than I.”

Gulian Swann nodded slightly. Bronze Yohn steepled his hands in front of a small smile. Jason Mallister stroked his beard. Abram Gaunt rubbed his thumb over the knuckle of his forefinger. They had all known that their king was no coward; they wouldn’t have gone along with his plan of deliberately springing the ambush otherwise. But to have a king who was brave not only in battle but in the council chamber . . . that was rare indeed. And quite gratifying, for him to trust that their esteem of him did not need continual stoking, like a blacksmith’s forge.

“I wonder why the rebel himself did not lead that assault?” Anders mused. “Could he have been wounded in the first attack?”

“Possibly,” Gulian answered. “Or he could have been commanding from the rear.”

Anders shook his head. “You don’t know Oberyn as I do,” he said. “The man never finds a fight without throwing himself into it headfirst.”

“Whether Oberyn was injured or not is irrelevant,” Stannis said decisively. “He was able to break off the engagement and make good his escape.” His lips twisted in what could be called a self-deprecating smile if it weren’t so much like a grimace. “I still believe that we could have pursued him but, upon consideration, I agree with Ser Cortnay and Lord Anders that it would have been too chancy an endeavor to justify.”

“Especially since we’ve accomplished our primary objective,” Anders said. “The road to Sunspear lies open before us. A sennight’s march, maybe two, and we will be able to put Sunspear in order and go about crushing the Viper with no difficulties behind us.”

“Gods be merciful and make it so,” said Ser Symond Templeton. All present joined him in signing themselves with the seven-pointed star. “But what if Prince Doran either refuses to admit us or is incapable of doing so? I mean no insult, but all reports agree that he has not been himself since the Red Viper rebelled.”

“If Doran doesn’t admit us, then we shall have to negotiate with Princess-Consort Mellario,” Stannis replied. “By all reports, she seems to have assumed power in Sunspear. And quite well at that.”
“Really?” asked Jason in a surprised tone. “Can she do that?”

Trebor cocked an eyebrow. “She is the Princess-Consort, and of sound mind and body,” he said coolly. “In the event of Prince Doran’s incapacitation, the power of the Prince passes to her, since Princess Arianne is still a minor. Surely you must know that we do things differently here in Dorne, Lord Mallister.”

“Yes, but . . .” Jason trailed off, knowing that saying _hearing is different from seeing_ would sound as lame in his mouth as it did in his mind.

Stannis tapped a fingernail against the table. “In any case, we must needs prepare to continue our march to Sunspear. I am told that our wounded can all be ready to travel by the day after tomorrow, but . . .”

XXX

Ricasso was a maester, not a minstrel, but he dabbled in poetry when his duties allowed. And looking at King Stannis meeting with Princess Mellario, he knew he would have fodder for a dozen poems based on the similarities and differences between them. On the one hand, there was Princess Mellario, slender and graceful, draped in loose robes of orange silk painted with the sun-and-spear of the Martells, haughtily beautiful with her high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes reinforced by the gravity of her thirty-seven years. On the other, King Stannis, broad-shouldered and strongly built, clad in armor covered with a yellow linen tabard embroidered with the black crowned stag of his house, his face grimly set so that the light beard he was beginning to cultivate bristled as best it could.

The contrast they offered was startling, but even more startling was the similarity that Ricasso could sense in both of them. The shadows under Mellario’s eyes, concealed by cleverly applied cosmetics, and the lines already setting in on Stannis’ face, both spoke of heavy responsibilities suddenly assumed and stoically burdened, while the way Stannis gripped the hilt of his sword and the way Mellario spread her hands on the arms of the throne revealed what they chose to base their strength on. For Mellario, Ricasso knew, it was the House that she had married into; its antiquity, its reputation, and its long line of heroes and heroines. For Stannis, it was his own strength and his absolute trust in himself to meet any challenge with all the craft and might he could command; a natural enough attitude in a man just shy of his twenty-first nameday.

Ricasso could only hope that the two could see their similarities more than their differences; especially since they were meeting in private except for him and Stannis’ stern-looking Lord Commander, Ser Cortnay Penrose. The official reception had already taken place and the audience, where Stannis would decree the new course of royal policy in Dorne, was to take place tomorrow. The purpose of this conversation was to negotiate that policy.

“I wish to begin,” Stannis said finally, “by saying that Prince Doran cannot continue as Prince of Dorne. What I saw of him at the reception confirmed it in my mind.” Doran had attended the reception, under the influence of a stimulant, and had retired as early as was decently allowable. Even dosed, he had been dull-eyed and his speech had been soft and stilted, a far cry from the rich, flowing baritone that he had had before the rebellion.

Mellario tilted her head to one side. “For now, at least,” she conceded, “but he need not always be so. Maester Caelotte tells me that his condition improves daily. In time he will be able to resume his duties.”

Stannis shook his head. “His recovery will not suffice,” he said bluntly. “I require that Dorne be ruled by one who can maintain the King’s Peace in the face of all hazards, and in case of
catastrophe provide effective leadership until royal aid arrives. Only one Martell has been able to do so, and it is not Doran.”

Mellario blinked, and then smiled slightly. “You have an odd sense of flattery, Your Grace.”

“The truth is not flattery,” Stannis replied. “You have proved yourself worthy to rule Dorne in my name until Doran’s heir comes of age. That said,” he frowned briefly, “those Houses that have declared their loyalty will need a greater voice in the running of Dorne to compensate them for their loyalty. At the very least the regency council will need to include Lord Yronwood.”

Mellario flipped her hand. “Like as not,” she said, “but the size and nature of such a council can wait until my goodbrother is brought to heel.”

“Which, with any luck, should be sometime in the next few months,” Stannis said. “With your forces added to mine, we should be able to push the rebels into the deep deserts easily enough, and then we can send our men in to root them out.”

“That may prove difficult,” Mellario observed. “The desert has eaten royal armies before.”

Stannis smiled grimly. “Not one that I have commanded,” he said.

XXX

The year 286 has just dawned. The Red Viper Rebellion is just under a year old.

After his defeat on the banks of the Greenblood, Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper, takes his fight to the desert. Royal forces pursue him, bringing fire and sword in their wake. The war becomes an affair of raid and counter-raid, of ambush and reprisal, of destroyed wells and populations sent to the Greenblood to be held prisoner in guarded camps. While royalist soldiers scour the desert, Ironborn reavers under the command of Quellon Greyjoy and his son Euron sweep the coast. Atrocities are committed by land and sea.

Oberyn himself fights for every inch he can. After being driven from Vaith by overwhelming numbers, he divides his forces in order for them to more effectively harry the royal forces. King Stannis, in response, divides his armies into ‘hunting parties’, each charged with killing every rebel they can find.

After months of searching, a ‘hunting party’ finds evidence that Oberyn has passed nearby, and sets out in pursuit . . .

- The opening crawl from The Red Viper: Blood and Sand, the third season of a popular television series that depicts a fictionalized version of Oberyn Martell’s life and which aired in 1987 AC. Claims that production of the series was partially funded by the Sons of the Sand, an extremist nationalist group, remain officially unfounded.

At least it’s cool in here, Ser Rickon Riverbend thought as he knelt in the Dornish sept. Gods know that not much else about it is right.

The village of Palm Spring, so named for the date palms that grew around a spring that formed a respectable pond, boasted a small sept on account of it being home to some two hundred souls, but it was evidently little-used and had been designed by someone with tastes that leaned towards the heretical. There was a layer of dust on the altars of the Warrior, the Crone, and the Stranger, and the layout of the altars was wrong as well. Instead of being separated into their own alcoves, as was proper, the altars were grouped by twos, the Father with the Mother, the Warrior with the Maiden, and the Crone with the Smith, while the Stranger’s altar sat by itself. What was more,
instead of wearing a properly beatific expression the Mother looked almost as stern as the Father.

Ser Rickon scowled for a moment, and then cleared his mind with an effort of will. Heretical or not, it was still a sept, and he needed to pray.

He had been a landed knight’s bastard son, trained to arms out of a sense of paternal responsibility that had come late to his father and had probably been spurred by the fact that his trueborn son was a sour and small-souled man. By dint of hard work and uncomplaining service he had managed to earn a place in the guard of Lord Darry. He had been passed over for promotion and reward in favor of men with better names than Rivers, but his skill at arms and chivalrous conduct had won him a modicum of respect.

And then the Rebellion had come along and given him his chance. The hedgerows had given him a reputation for valor and two captured knights whose ransoms had provided him with a new courser, a fine suit of plate armor, and a better sword than any he had previously owned. But an even sweeter reward than the ransoms had been respect; men who had scorned him for his bastard birth had offered him a place at their fire, bought him wine, even tried to claim his friendship. No less a knight than the Blackfish himself had asked him to join the Sunset Company on its venture!

That offer he had refused; justice aside the gods could not look with favor upon Robert Baratheon, who was as foolish as he was vulgar. The sheer arrogance it must have taken to forswear the crown that the gods had placed on his head and forsake the responsibilities of kingship was mind-boggling. Not for nothing was pride accounted the deadliest of sins.

On top of which, the Book of the Father clearly stated *vengeance is mine. For mortal men to usurp that power smacked not just of pride, but hubris.*

So Rickon had stayed in Westeros, and quickly found himself lordless; Lord Darry had needed to make room in his service for a bastard nephew, or some such, and Rickon had been the lowest-ranked and most junior of his sworn swords. At least the old man had been apologetic about the necessity, and gracious enough to give him a purse of silver and a letter of recommendation with his seal to present to any lord who Rickon approached. But with the end of the Rebellion the lords had no need of another sword, even one as good and well-mannered as Rickon, even with so many fools rushing off to the East to find glory or an early grave, and so he had found himself a hedge knight at the age of twenty-eight.

The first thing he had done was find a master herald and change his name from Rivers to Riverbend; he could not entirely escape the stain of bastardy, but he would change as much of it as he could. That had taken much of the purse Lord Darry had given him, and his horse had steadily eaten through much of the rest. He had been down to two silver stags and a handful of coppers when the call went out for men to put down a Dornish rebellion.

He had ridden to King’s Landing the next day and taken the King’s star; a true knight fought in his king’s service when called upon, without reservation. He had done good service at the Greenblood with the Royal Brigade, and when the rebel had taken to the desert he had been tapped to lead a ‘hunting party’; a column of two to three-score knights, light horse, and mounted archers that operated as an independent unit that pursued the rebels by whatever means it’s commander deemed necessary. King Stannis, in his wisdom, had given his officers considerable latitude in how they went about running the rebels to earth; almost the only injunction laid on their initiative was that those Dornishmen who submitted to the King’s Justice and kept his Peace were to be protected to the last drop of blood or bloodily avenged, as circumstances dictated.

By the gods’ mercy he was here under the former of those circumstances; what the rebels left of their victims made hard viewing even for seasoned veterans. In fact, he had been told that a man
who dwelt in this village had information for him.

As he was saying a prayer to the Warrior for the skill to lead his men well (he knew that he did not lack for courage) the door to the vestry opened and soft footsteps announced the coming of a man who knelt beside him. As Rickon finished praying, the man, hooded and cloaked even in the heat of the Dornish desert, turned his head.

“Ser knight, I have information,” he said softly. Rickon made a face; even the language was different here, with the stretching, rolling contortions it put words through. It made him long for the true speech of his homeland, that lovely land of broad fields and green forests watered by the mighty Trident, so different from this place with its burning sands and bleak mountains and anemic streams that the locals insisted were rivers.

“Speak, then, in the king’s name,” he said, giving the countersign. It was crude, the fat, bald man who had taught him the password that royal informants would use had said, but it had the advantage of being simple. Rickon wouldn’t have known, as he had little stomach for such games; give him a good horse, a strong lance, and a level field any day.

“Rebel horsemen came through this village last night,” the informant whispered. “They stopped only to water their horses and themselves, but I heard one of them say that it was not too far to their camp. Two hours hard riding and no more.”

Rickon fingered the small crystal he had pulled out from under his breastplate. “Any idea of where this camp might be?” he asked softly.

“There is an arroyo, a ravine, some twenty miles from here,” the informant whispered. “The spring there is too small for herds of goats or sheep, so we of this village do not go there, but it might be sufficient for a score and a half of horsemen who were careful not to let themselves or their horses drink too much.”

Rickon nodded. “Can you lead us to this ravine?” he inquired.

The informant spread his hands. “Ser knight, most in this village are loyal subjects of His Grace, but no one loves a tell-tale. To do even this much is to put my life at risk. If I were to lead you to these rebels I would be dead before the sennight is out. Come, and hearken,” the informant stood and walked up to the Warrior’s altar; Rickon followed and winced to see him drawing a map in the dust with his fingertip; it wasn’t strictly against the laws of the Faith, but it didn’t do to show the gods disrespect. “Ride out on the road towards Hellholt,” the informant whispered, “and when you have gone some six miles, stop and turn due north, so. From that point it is perhaps two hours fast ride for a single man, and you will come upon the ravine from the side.”

“Does it open at either end?” Rickon asked, committing the crude map to memory.

“Aye,” said the Dornishman. “But the ways in and out are narrow; only ten sheep or so may pass abreast. Perhaps one or two men on horseback, if they wish to move at speed?” He waggled his hand to indicate uncertainty.

Rickon finished committing the map to memory and swept it away with the flat of his hand. “Will you be safe here, after we leave?” he asked, as he continued to brush the dust off the altar.

“With the gods’ help, yes,” said the Dornishman. “But all things are in their hands and they help best those who help themselves.”

Rickon nodded, the saying was much the same in the Riverlands, and fished a small medallion
stamped with the royal arms on one side and a lidless eye on the other out of his belt pouch. “If you must flee then get yourself to Vaith, or Godsgrace, or Sunspier,” he said, “and present this to any king’s officer. Protection will be provided, and passage out of Dorne.”

The Dornishman accepted the medallion and pressed it to his forehead. “Gods bless His Grace, and the Warrior guide your hand, ser knight,” he said, slipping away and back to the vestry.

Four hours later, Rickon and his hunting party were riding across the desert, a score of loyal Dornish light horsemen, what they called *jinetes*, half as many mounted archers, and ten knights with their squires, who were armed after the fashion of the *jinetes* with light ring-mail shirts under their surcoats, a shield, a sword, and a pair of javelins. The knights, squires, and mounted archers were riding in a loose double line abreast that alternated squires with mounted archers and held the knights as a reserve, while half of the *jinetes* formed a scouting screen and the rest covered the flanks. Every eye scanned the horizon and the crests of the low dunes they were riding through; the rebels fought from ambush wherever they could, and what they did to prisoners was enough to make even the boldest man wary.

The *jinetes* out in front suddenly stopped just short of the crest of the next dune, raising their spears straight up in the signal to halt, and after hurried consultation one wheeled his horse around and trotted up to Rickon. “The ravine is up ahead, ser,” he said, his accent less pronounced than the informant’s had been; he was Stony Dornish, from the Fowler lands, lent with the rest of his bandera by Randyll Tarly, who was holding the western edge of the desert. “Just beyond this next dune there is a gentle downslope to a flat stretch that reaches for about a long bowshot and a half, and through this the ravine runs. Both the slope and the flat can be easily passed by men on horseback. There is no cover to approach by stealth.”

Rickon bared his teeth. The moment he went over that crest, then, he would be spotted. Assuming, of course, that he hadn’t been already, although his men took steps to limit their visibility. Their metal was either carefully dulled and browned or covered, and whenever they rode near a hill or dune-crest they lowered their lances and spears to the horizontal to keep them from poking over the crest and revealing them. “Are the ways out of the ravine within easy reach from here?”

“Yes, especially for men traveling at speed,” the Dornishman replied. “Also, the sides of the ravine seem steep, too steep for riders.”

Rickon only had to consider for a moment. Turning in the saddle, he called for his second-in-command, a Crownlander named Ser Willam Gisbourne, and the sergeant of the archers, a Stormlander from the Marches who answered to the name of Bent. “Ser Willam, take half the cavalry, and take the left end of the ravine. Block it off, keep them from escaping, and run down any who get out before we get there. I’ll do the same on the right. Bent, take the archers to the edge of the ravine; your first target will be any who seem about to get away from us. Once the leakers are dealt with, turn your bows on those in the ravine.”

Bent smiled evilly. “Fish in a barrel they’ll be, ser, and no mistake,” he said eagerly.

“Remember,” Rickon said sharply, “we want prisoners to interrogate, and anyone who asks quarter is to be given it. We are not murderers, as the rebels are.” Ser Willam nodded. Bent did as well, after a shrug and a muttered “Could’ve fooled me” earned him a scorching look.

Five minutes later, all was in readiness; the knights, squires, and *jinetes* were deployed in two columns on either end of the formation and the archers were in a single line with their bows already strung. Turbans and headscarfs, worn as protection against the blistering Dornish sun, were stripped off and replaced with helmets, and the dull yellow kaftan that each man wore to keep the sun off his armor was rolled into a tube and stashed on the back of the saddle. Rickon took a final
look up and down the line, craned his neck to check that his squire was in his proper place, and whistled sharply, gesturing with the light spear that he had taken to using in place of a knight’s lance.

The hunting party came over the crest of the dune at the trot and accelerated to a fast canter on the downslope, whooping as they came; they were already in plain sight of any sentries, there was no need to try and maintain stealth. They were a long javelin cast away when the first rebel riders started to come streaming out of the ravine at either end. Rickon was dimly aware of the archers dismounting and sending their first arrows whistling away, but he ignored them as he tossed his spear into a throwing grip, stood in his stirrups, and threw with all the power in his arms and back; he had taken to practicing spear-throwing from horseback after the Greenblood, where the rebel jinetes had tormented the knights with showers of javelins.

His spear sank home into a magnificent coal-black horse just coming out of the ravine, which made it another four steps before collapsing with a despairing neigh, its rider missing his opportunity to get clear of the saddle and becoming pinned under the saddle and almost a half-ton of horseflesh by his left leg. A shouted command as Rickon drew his sword sent the jinetes after the men who had gotten out before the dying horse had choked the escape route and Rickon and his knights struck the two men who had gone back for their comrade and a third who had come out of the ravine to assist them like a hammer. With a shout of “Watch him!” to his squire and another of “On me!” to his knights, Rickon dismounted and went to one knee in the entrance to the ravine, his shield covering him from front knee to chin and his sword drawn back ready to stab as his knights joined him.

“Yield!” he roared over the chorus of screams that told him that the archers had reached the lip of the ravine and were picking their targets. “Yield or die!”

A cry of “Fuck you, northerner!” choked off in a gurgling scream. Rickon shook his head and rose to his feet. “Forward!” he shouted, leading his knights into the ravine.

The rebels fought valiantly, but in their light mail-shirts and brigandines they were a poor match for knights in half-plate at close quarters, especially veterans such as Rickon’s men were. As Rickon tramped out of the valley cleaning his sword on a cloth taken from one of the slain rebels and feeling the sudden draining sensation that always hit him after fighting hard, he found his squire where he had left him, standing on the prone rebel’s right arm. “Any trouble, Tytos?” he asked lightly.

Tytos Hill shook his head. He was a lad of fifteen, who would have been handsome in a dark and brooding sort of fashion but for the shocking burn scar that warped the left side of his face. Tytos was a poor conversationalist, being sullen, sharp-tongued, and prone to sarcasm, but his lack of graces was remedied by his martial skills, which were well-advanced for one so young. He was a decent jouster and a fair hand with a war hammer, mace, or axe, but with a sword he was a natural artist, enough so that only Rickon’s greater experience allowed him to give the young Westerman the proper tutelage. “Not much any man can do in his condition,” he said roughly. “But look at his surcoat, ser.”

Rickon looked as he returned his sword to its sheath and felt his heart skip a beat. The sun and spear of the Martell’s, encircled by a red viper with its fangs bared. Only one man in Dorne was entitled to bear those arms. Rickon looked the prisoner in his swarthy, sharp-nosed face. “What is your name, friend?” he asked courteously.

“I’m no friend of yours, lion-arse licker,” the rebel spat in a voice shot through with pain that trailed off as he grimaced and clutched at his trapped leg with his left hand. Tytos lifted his mace, a
two-foot long steel bar with an x-shaped cross-section formed by four flanges that flared outwards as they neared the striking end, and was about to bring it down on the rebel’s good leg when Rickon reached out and grabbed him by the wrist.

Tytos glanced at him. “He would do as much to us,” he said defensively, “if not worse.”

“Yet we do not,” Rickon said firmly. “That is how we are better than them.”

Tytos subsided, grumbling, as the sergeant of the party’s jinetes, a man named Gerris Sand who was apparently a bastard nephew of Lord Blackmont, trotted up, flourishing his bloody sword, which was slightly curved in the Dornish fashion. “None escaped, ser,” he said gleefully. “The fastest made it a hundred yards. I took him from behind, thusly . . .”

Rickon raised a hand. “Some other time,” he said. “Do you know this man?” He gestured at the prisoner.

Gerris peered down at the prisoner’s face, and his eyes grew wide. “Gods old and new!” he spat. “It is Oberyn Martell!”

Rickon suppressed the surge of triumph that welled in his breast. “You are sure?” he asked. “I mean no offense, but we must be certain.”

“When he came to Blackmont, all men came out to see the Red Viper,” Gerris said, almost babbling in his excitement. “I only saw him at a distance, but I saw him clearly, aye and the horse that he rode and which now lies on top of him.” Gerris threw his head back and whooped. “Ah, ser knight, the gods smile upon us! His Grace King Stannis will give much in gold for the pleasure of killing him!”

Oberyn Martell spat at the hooves of Gerris’ horse. “Laugh while you may, traitor,” he growled sibilantly. “The deepest circle of the Hells is reserved for betrayers.”

“And there is a furnace thrice-heated awaiting thee in that pit, Viper, for betraying your prince and bringing this war upon us,” Gerris snarled back. “Although you could burn for eternity and it would be insufficient.” The Dornishman looked up at Rickon. “Shall I cut out his tongue, ser, that we might be spared his curses?”

Rickon shook his head. “A gag will suffice,” he said. “Bind him well, but not cruelly, and search him for poisons. I will not have any man cheat the King’s justice, especially not this one.”

Twelve days later, Rickon was standing in the great hall of Castle Vaith, recounting his tale to King Stannis and his court, which broke into light applause as he came to the end of his report. “Well done, Ser Rickon,” said the King, who had led the applause. “My steward shall see your men rewarded with monies; I am told that Lord Tyrell has placed a substantial price on Oberyn’s head after he placed a price on the head of Tyrell’s son Willas. As for your own reward, attend upon me after this audience is dismissed and we shall speak of it.” As Rickon bowed and withdrew to the company of his hunting party, who received him with fierce grins of triumph, Stannis turned to Oberyn. “Now, Prince Oberyn, what shall we do with you?”

Oberyn, who had been carried in on a chair due to his splinted leg with his wrists manacled behind the chairs back, spat on the floor. “I maintain the justice of my cause,” he snarled, his face contorted with hatred, “and curse you for a tyrant blinded by Cersei Lannister’s tits! Let me out of these chains and face me with a sword, weakling, and let us see whose cause the gods favor.”

Stannis cocked an eyebrow. “Trial by combat is resorted to only when there is a question of guilt to
be determined,” he said evenly. “As a rebel taken in arms, your guilt is not in doubt. Nor will I have it said that I made a crippled man fight for his life.” He rose from his seat. “Oberyn Martell,” he said formally, “by my right of high justice in all of Westeros, I find you guilty of high treason against the Iron Throne, and sentence you to death by beheading.” He turned to the Lord Commander of his Stormguard. “Ser Cortnay, take the condemned in custody. See to it that he remains in good health until he is brought out to die.”

Oberyn cursed loud and long as a quartet of Stormguard knights stepped forward to pick up his chair and carry him out of the hall, being silenced only by a blow from a gauntleted fist that knocked him unconscious. As the rebel prince slumped in his chair and the court broke up in excited conversation, a page in royal livery tugged on Rickon’s sleeve and led him out of the hall. Rickon followed, his head spinning with the possibilities that royal favor would make possible. Land and wealth certainly, but honor was just as good, and Rickon knew that the Stormguard had a dozen posts left to fill before it reached the required forty-nine. The Stormguard didn’t have the reputation that the Kingsguard had, but Rickon knew a legend in the making when he saw one. It was a rare man who was able to become a part of such legends.

Oberyn Martell was beheaded in the courtyard of Castle Vaith before a crowd of a thousand people; by all accounts he died as he lived, proud and defiant to his last breath. With Oberyn’s execution, and the death of Lord Qorgyle in an ambush eight days later, the Red Viper Rebellion was decisively crushed. If the Red Viper’s banner was raised in later years it was by bandit gangs seeking a fig leaf for their crimes.

Of course, Stannis’ work was not completed with simply defeating the rebels. Over the next two months Sunspear played host to almost a tenth of the nobility of the Seven Kingdoms as Stannis hammered out the new terms of the governance of Dorne with the Dornish magnates; perhaps the most exotic attendee was Balon Greyjoy, whose father Quellon had died in a raid on a rebel camp on the Dornish coast and had come to Sunspear to pledge his fealty to Stannis. A proposal that the Martells be deprived of the Princedom was shot down by Stannis himself, but they did not escape with a whole skin either. Doran Martell abdicated as Prince of Dorne; by the end of the sennight he was on a royal ship bound for Quiet Isle, there to live out his days as a contemplative monk of the Faith under observation by the garrison of Saltpants. Princess Mellario was confirmed as Princess-Regent for her daughter Arianne, but was required to accept a regency council composed of three royalist magnates in the persons of Lord Anders Yronwood, Lady Larra Blackmont, and Lord Franklyn Fowler, one neutral in the form of Lady Casella Dalt, who would become one of Mellario’s stronger supporters on the council, and Ser Harold Jordayne.

The inclusion of Ser Harold on the regency council would ordinarily have been inexplicable, for aside from being the first Dornishman to personally swear fealty to Stannis at the start of the rebellion and being of impeccable loyalty afterwards, he was relatively undistinguished. Indeed, the most noteworthy service he performed during the rebellion was ensuring House Jordayne’s loyalty on the march to Sunspear, a feat which owed more to his glib tongue than any skill at arms. But Ser Harold was no longer a mere knight, but the instrument of a bold new experiment on Stannis’ part.

The end of the rebellion did not mean an immediate return to peace across Dorne; a few die-hard rebels still lurked in the desert, while bandit gangs roamed from the Torrentine to the Greenblood, taking advantage of the breakdown of law and order to enjoy a heyday of raiding and pillage. In order to combat this, Stannis created a new order of knighthood. The Royal Order of the Sun, as it was called, served three purposes. Firstly, and most explicitly, it was charged with enforcing the King’s Peace in Dorne, delivering grievances to the regency council on which Ser Harold sat by virtue of his rank as Master of the Order, and executing justice on their behalf. Secondly, it provided a means to reward knights and men-at-arms who had done good service in the Rebellion
and would otherwise have become unemployed with the end of hostilities; a sterling example was Ser Rickon Riverbend, who was the named the Order’s first Marshal. Thirdly, and most controversially, it was meant to be the visible arm of the royal government in Dorne; the office of Grand Master of the Order was made hereditary in the Baratheon royal line and all Order patrols were to fly the king’s banner, alongside their own banner of a yellow sun-in-splendor on a white field.

The creation of the Order was certainly unprecedented, and was viewed with much wariness and no small amount of alarm among the conservative faction at court and the neutral-leanin Dornish, but they had vital support among the royalist Dornish. Lord Yronwood granted the Order five farms on his lands, and other loyalist lords provided similar grants, either of lands or of other assets; Lord Jordayne gifted each of the Order’s four principal officers a sand steed from his personal stud. The reasons for this generosity varied widely, both generally and personally, but they appear to be a mix of genuine loyalty to King Stannis, and by extension to his representatives, and self-interest; Lady Blackmont, writing to Lord Dayne, described them as “not just our shield against future rebellions, but a club with which we may beat down our enemies if they stand against us.” The justice of the latter claim is borne out by a review of Marshal Rickon’s reports to the regency council, which largely consisted of claims that the remaining members of Houses Uller and Qorgyle where either granting safe haven to bandits or else failing in their duty to hunt them down; consequently both of these former rebel Houses suffered a series of penalties, including censures, fines, and even confiscation of lands, which were typically awarded to the Fowlers, the Yronwoods, and the Daynes, all of which had supported the Iron Throne.

The consequences of the Order’s creation reverberate to this day . . .

- All King’s Men: The Knightly Orders of Stannis the Grim by Jon Daniels, published 1897 AC
“You are sure I cannot convince you to stay?” Eddard asked, hoping against hope.

Jon Umber shook his head. “I’m still the Lord of Last Hearth, Ned,” he said regretfully. “Now that Rhaegar’s dead, I can no longer stay away. My people need me.”

Maege Mormont also shook her head. “I need to take my daughter home,” she said, glancing at the coffin being loaded aboard the ship. “But I’ll be back, even if this overgrown loon won’t.” She jerked a thumb towards the Greatjon, who cocked an eyebrow. “And I’ll bring every sword your brother can spare with me,” she went on. “The debt of my daughter’s death is paid, but there are still slavers in these lands. I have not yet had my fill of blood.”

“Nor have I,” Eddard said grimly. News of Rhaegar’s death had reached Myr a sennight ago, and Eddard had received it with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the Rapist was dead, and Lyanna’s blood avenged. On the other, Eddard had not delivered the fatal blow himself, and Ser Arthur Dayne’s rescue of Rhaegar from the field of Tara and his subsequent escape from Myr meant that he was denied the pleasure of sending Rhaegar’s skull to Winterfell to be laid at the feet of Lyanna’s statue in the crypts. Moreover, Viserys still lived, and so long as one Targaryen drew breath, Eddard’s vengeance was incomplete.

In the meantime, the kingdom was losing men. Some had decided that with Rhaegar dead, the Company’s quest had been fulfilled and they were released from their oaths. Others, more prosaically, had made enough money from plunder that they wanted to go home and spend it, or at least make sure that it got to any family they had left behind in Westeros. Those who fell under the former category Eddard had released from service with the condition that they send as many recruits and as much aid as they could from their homelands. The latter Eddard had dispatched with wishes for safe travels after extracting oaths to return as swiftly as they might. The ships that had started arriving over the past two sennights, bold merchant seamen from Braavos or King’s Landing or Gulltown taking a chance at being the first to make commercial contacts with the new kingdom, were making a fair amount of money out of it.

“We’ll need more than swords, though,” Eddard said finally after a long moment. “We need maesters, scribes, war horses, law-readers . . . “ he spread his hands as if to indicate the enormity of the problem. “We have the makings of a kingdom, but we need a fully functioning kingdom, and we need it quickly. Tyrosh and Lys may be contenting themselves with probing the borders so far, but there will be open war within a year. And that leaves aside the Dothraki.”

“I’ll send what aid I can,” Jon rumbled. “If nothing else I can tell every restless lad in the North that there’s fame and fortune to be had in these lands if he serves you well. If no one else, poor old Arnolf’s sons will come. Better than sitting around Karhold the rest of their lives living on Rickard’s goodwill and they have their father to avenge.” He grinned mirthlessly. “And if Brandon complains, I can tell him that I’m doing him a favor. First by making sure his brother has sufficient force to defend himself, second by getting all those hot-headed young men somewhere they can make themselves useful.”

Eddard favored Jon with an irritated look. “Jon,” he said evenly, “don’t give Brandon more grief than you must. You know I can’t take Winterfell even if I wanted it, now, and Benjen is promised to the Night’s Watch. I would take it amiss if Brandon’s children were disinherited and you had
anything to do with it."

“Don’t fash yourself, Ned,” Jon said, waving a hand larger than most dinner plates. “I’ll be the soul of loyalty to Brandon and his bairns while I’m in the North and under his rule.” The towering Northman looked Eddard full in the face. “But hearkee, Ned,” he said seriously. “If you need my sword, all you have to do is call and I’ll come. And if Brandon doesn’t give me leave,” his great paw flicked sharply, as if to shoo away an insect, “then fuck him.”

Eddard considered a range of responses, and in the end opted for simply sticking his hand out. “Can’t say fairer than that,” he said resignedly, exchanging grips with Jon and Maege in turn. “Gods watch over you both.”

XXX

The hedge knight knew he was not quite the picture of chivalry. His horse was no great destrier of the Highgarden stables or the great stud farm outside Lannisport, but a graying and scarred rounsey of no particular breeding that he called Jack; he had stopped giving his horses fancy names years ago. His armor, which consisted primarily of a breastplate, vambraces, and a kettle helm, was old and seamed with the bright lines that showed where old dents had been hammered out and was painted a dull black, as was his shield; the paint helped keep the metal from rusting and the wood from rotting. His arming sword, broad-bladed and with a less acute point than newer blades, was sharp and clean, but undeniably old; it had been his uncle’s sword before the old man shat himself to death after drinking from a stream in the Stormlands, and was a generation out of date. He himself was no maiden’s fantasy either; years on the road, interspersed with fighting for as much pay as he could cadge from whatever lord he served at the time, had battered a once-handsome face into homeliness and weathered him like an old boulder.

All that said, he was still in a cheery mood. It was a late summer day with fine weather, he had money in his purse and food in his saddlebags courtesy of the Dornish rebellion, and he knew where a good camping place was to be found on this road on the eastern bank of the Mander. He had been on the roads for thirty years, first as his uncle’s page and squire and then as a knight, and he knew every trick of how to survive the solitary and nomadic existence of the hedge knight. And even if he hadn’t, this particular camping place was widely known, for if hedge knights weren’t there then drovers or local shepherds usually were, or young nobles who had gone hunting and decided to stay out overnight.

So he wasn’t terribly surprised to see the glow of a fire through the trees that surrounded the site. “Hello the fire!” he called as he rode up; there were rules to life on the road and one of them was that when you approached a camp you always announced yourself. If you didn’t, then whoever was in that camp had the right to assume that you weren’t friendly and act accordingly. That sort of thing could get bloody in a tearing hurry, especially when it involved men who lived by their wits and their skill at arms.

“Hello yourself!” came the reply; a Riverlander by the accent, if the hedge knight was any judge. He himself was a Crownlander from around Sow’s Horn, although he hadn’t visited his family’s home in years. “Come and join us, friend, if friend you be.”

The hedge knight walked his horse up to the edge of the camping site and dismounted with a small groan of relief; he would never see forty again and long days in the saddle left him stiffer than they used to. Stripping off his heavy steerhide gloves he held out his hand to the man who had risen to greet him. “Ser Vernan Irons,” he introduced himself. “I have food to share, if you’re agreeable.”

“More than,” said the other man, a thickset fellow with a short goatee and a bushy moustache. “Ser Lanard Blackpool, at your service. My friend here is Ser Brynnan the Axe, as you might tell by his
weapon.” The man sitting on the ground flicked a finger off his brow in acknowledgement; he was a powerfully built man with hands like spades; the horseman’s axe resting conveniently close to his hand had a shaft as long as a man’s arm with a deceptively small head.

Introductions being taken care of and the sun going down, the hedge knights set to work. By the time the bottom edge of the sun had touched the horizon, Vernan’s horse had been unsaddled, a small pot of nail soup was bubbling over the fire, and Brynnan had produced a bottle of rough wine that made its way around.

“Whereabouts you coming from?” asked Brynnan as he spooned a helping of soup into his bowl.

“Dorne, along the Torrentine,” Vernan replied. “What with Oberyn getting the axe, Lord Tarly didn’t need me anymore, so he released me from his service.”

“You were in Dorne?” asked Lanard, perking up. “I was there myself, around Skyreach mostly.” He shook his head. “In about a hundred years, I’ll want to do that again. Hotter than a frying pan and never knowing if this was the day some rebel bastard was going to dry-gulch you while you were taking a piss. Were you in Dorne, Brynnan?”

The dour Westerlander shook his head. “I was sworn to Lord Foote at the time,” he said, “and the West didn’t march. Something about not poking a thumb in the Dornishmen’s eye unnecessarily.” He snorted. “Load of rot, you ask me. Do I look like a Clegane?”

Lanard cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “Depend on the light,” he said, an affectedly serious tone in his voice, “but if you turn your head just to the right and furrow your brow . . .” Brynnan threw a small pebble at him lightly while Vernan laughed. “Thank the gods it’s over, though,” Lanard went on. “Back in country the gods truly love with decent weather instead of that burning hellhole.”

“Except for the part where we’re not getting paid anymore,” Vernan replied, blowing on a spoonful of soup. “War or peace, we still have to eat, and so do our horses.” Swallowing the spoonful of soup he glanced at Brynnan. “Any of the western lords retaining men?”

“If they were, I wouldn’t be here,” Brynnan replied. “Old Tywin has the Westerlands sewn up tighter than a moneylender’s purse, and his patrols don’t look kindly on hedge knights or freeriders roaming around the place without being in service. So when I lost my place to a man who, to be fair, was better with a sword than I am with an axe, I thought I’d go east and see if there was any truth to the news out of Essos.”

That provoked a moment of silence. For months now, news of what had passed in Essos had spread through the Seven Kingdoms like wildfire. A great battle had been fought that had left ten thousand dead upon the field. Myr had been besieged, and then sacked with great slaughter. Robert Baratheon, once called Robert the Brief, was now a king again, this time of Myr. Rhaegar Targaryen was dead, either in the battle or later after his flight to Volantis. Robert summoned all brave men who loved freedom and feared neither toil nor battle to his new kingdom, where leal service would be richly rewarded.

“I heard as there were lordships for the taking in Myr now,” Lanard offered. “Fight well and serve loyally and Baratheon’ll give you land and make you a lord, and never mind what you were before.”

Brynnan looked up from the fire sharply. “Is that true?” he asked, his voice edged. “Because if it’s not true, then that’s a very poor joke, and you shouldn’t make it.”
Lanard held up his hands. “I just heard it,” he said defensively. “I don’t know whether the news is true or not, I just hear it.”

Brynnan gestured acceptance and went back to staring at the fire. The words hung in the air. Land. Lordship. It was long and long since a new lordly house had been raised up. Even the best and luckiest of hedge knights could hope only to become a landed knight, with four or five farms under their hand and maybe a mill if they were lucky. To be sure hedge knights had joined the Kingsguard in days past, and word was that there were a few on the Stormguard, but even a man of the royal bodyguard still depended on his lord’s favor for his daily bread; incur your lord’s displeasure and you risked being dismissed without pay or reference, and maybe a beating if you were very unlucky. To own land in your own right was to be a lord; a small lord perhaps but a lord nonetheless. To own land was to never worry about starving again, to never fear being caught on the road without shelter in winter, to not have to contend with bad weather or bandits with only your own wits and your own sword-craft. What was more, to own land was to be able to buy proper armor or a good war-horse or a new sword, to be able to marry and father sons to carry on your name, to start a line that might last a thousand years if your heirs played their cards right.

But it was a rare lord who rewarded his sworn swords with land; for the most part, there was no unclaimed land to give in reward. And even if there was land, there was usually a shortage of people to farm it. Every lord in Westeros tried to lure people to their lands, but the simple fact was that farm work was brutally hard, and while the smallfolk tended to have large families, it wasn’t uncommon for four or five of every ten children to die before their fifth nameday. Even prosperous, safe, and well-governed lands tended to gain in population only slowly.

So if Robert Baratheon was rewarding good service with land . . .

“How much does it cost to buy a passage from King’s Landing to Myr?” Vernan asked finally.

Lanard shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, as I’ve never been on a ship,” he said. “Could be anywhere from fifty stags to fifty dragons.” He grimaced. “Probably more, to carry your horse.”

Brynnan shrugged. “Either way, it’s out of my reach,” he said sourly. “Lord Foote shoveled me out the gate without bothering to pay me for the last month I served him, the tight-fisted old bastard. Said that as payday hadn’t come around yet, I wasn’t entitled to pay.” He shrugged. “Guess I’ll have to head down to Dorne and see if I can get a place in this Order of the Sun people say the King’s set up.”

Vernan raised a finger. “I’ve an idea,” he said. “What say we pool our money together, ride to King’s Landing, and try to get passage to Myr all together? We might be able to knock a few stags off the price by volunteering to help fight off any pirates the ship runs into.”

Lanard and Brynnan looked at each other. “That could work,” Lanard said hesitantly. “I’ve got a fair amount left from my Dornish service still, enough that I should be able to pay for a passage with some left over.” He grimaced. “If it comes to that, we can probably make up any shortfall by selling our horses. Essos has horses, doesn’t it?”

“Must do,” said Brynnan. “What with bloody Dothraki crawling all over the place.” He grimaced again; Vernan thought it might be a favorite expression of his. “If you’ll help me pay my passage,” he said slowly, sounding like he was in pain, “I’ll pay you back as soon as I can, once we’re in Myr and in Baratheon’s service.”

Lanard waved a hand. “What’s a favor between comrades?” he said carelessly. “Besides, three stout lads like us?” He gave a cawing laugh. “We’ll have more gold off the magisters than we’ll know what to do with, ere long.”
“I’ll drink to that,” said Vernan pouring a measure of the rough wine into his small horn cup and passing the bottle to Brynnan, who did the same and passed it to Lanard. Vernan lifted his cup. “Hell or plunder, dog-brothers.”

The three hedge knights tapped their cups together to seal their pact.

**Author's Note: This chapter and the next few chapters will be taking place over the course of the next several months in-story as the fallout from the Fall of Myr and the Red Viper Rebellion takes effect.**
Howl and Scream

Howl and Scream

War without fire, Lyn Corbray’s old master-at-arms had told him, was like sausage without mustard. If that was the case, he reflected as he sipped at his canteen and surveyed the swath of border country that his men had swept through, this particular dish was well-seasoned indeed.

As Warden of the Southern Marches, Lyn was charged with keeping the peace throughout the new kingdom’s southern border country, repelling any incursions, and, in the event of a major invasion, holding the enemy at bay as long as he could until reinforcements arrived from the rest of the realm. On the face of it, this would have been a difficult task even with a strong and well-found realm; with a realm that was still being born, it was almost impossible.

Assuming of course, that you took a very limited view of the task and the power given you to carry it out.

The day after Robert and his progress had moved on, Lyn had placed Ser Eustace Hunter in command of Sirmium with a tenth of his force and taken the rest on a massive raid into the Tyroshi lands. The main column of infantry, a mixture of Westerosi spearmen and men of the Iron Legion, marched from one walled town to the other, storming them by surprise escalade under cover of night and bloodily sacking them, while parties of horsemen ranged out from the column to despoil and torch every village, estate, and farm they could reach. The Tyroshi border guards had suspected an incursion, and indeed had been reinforced by a company of Tyroshi regulars a sennight before the assault, but the speed and violence of the offensive had caught them off guard. The Prefect of the East, the Tyroshi governor, managed to rally enough of his forces to offer battle at the town of Tignes, but the companies of the Iron Legion who made up most of Lyn’s infantry had learned quickly and well from the Westerosi veterans and the Tyroshi infantry were scattered.

The goal was to turn the Tyroshi side of the border from a prosperous and well-ordered region that could serve as the storehouse of an invading army to a smoking ruin incapable of supporting any sizable force. And to do that Lyn was sweeping the frontier with sword and torch as it had not been swept in more than a century. The sellsword companies of the east could be brutal, to be sure, but their brutality had rules as to what could be demanded, what punishment could be levied if what was demanded was not produced and there was no excuse, and what compensation was due to those who produced promptly and in full; among other things the farm and draft horses of the Disputed Lands had a respectable amount of war-horse blood in their family tree. These rules were what allowed the free companies to serve one city one year and another the next year with a minimum of problems arising.

The Kingdom of Myr had no use for such rules. The old canons of conflict in Essos, where war was reduced to a business venture with sharply defined limits and strict rules, had been thrown out of the window the minute the first slave was freed. Lyn cared little for the prattling of Septon Jonothor about the holy cause of freedom and the divinely ordained duty of destroying the slavers, but he recognized the necessity of absolute victory. Every slave freed was another potential recruit to the Iron Legion, every estate burned was one that wouldn’t feed a Tyroshi army in the next campaign season, every town sacked was a town that couldn’t pay the taxes that would pay for such an army.

Then and there, Lyn resolved to serve the Lyseni borderlands as he had served the Tyroshi, and hang the fact that they were technically at peace. No one he had ever talked to expected that peace
to last out the year, and he knew better than most that the Kingdom of Myr was in no position to fight off an invasion. The best way to prevent such an invasion to turn the enemy border country into a wasteland incapable of supporting the passage of an army, and the best way to do that was to carry out such raids as this one on a regular basis.

Lyn recorked his canteen and tossed it back to his squire. They had another five miles to go today, and the best weapon he had in this situation was speed. More than once his hard-marching veterans had surprised a Tyroshi border guard company that hadn’t expected them for another day or two and put them to flight. But the pace had to be maintained.

Lyn bared his teeth in anticipation. He was already making the Tyroshi howl; by the time he was done with the Lyseni, they would **scream**.

XXX

Ser Gerold Potts looked down from the window of his solar at the lone man riding out from his holdfast into the bright dawn and grunted to himself. He had half-expected this, but he hadn’t thought that his second son had it in him to strike out into the unknown. In hindsight, he should probably have known better; he himself had never looked when he could leap.

“This is your fault,” his wife said reproachfully. Brenda Potts had been one of the beauties of Saltspans once, before age and children had rounded her frame and softened her face, although at times she was still the flashing-eyed spitfire who had caught Gerold’s attention as he rode through the town on business from his liege-lord. This was one of those times. “If you had told him that he was in your will yesterday, he wouldn’t have left.”

Gerold turned to where his wife sat on their bed. “Would you have had me lie to him?” he asked sardonically. “You know that the holdfast and the rents and produce from the farms have to go to Jon, along with the lion’s share of my wealth, and most of the rest went for Jenna’s dowry. All I can leave to Joren I’ve already given him. It would do him no favors to lead him on.”

“But you could have found him a place closer to home,” Brenda spat; she had stopped sobbing but her face was still splotchy and her eyes were red. Judging by the look she was giving him, grief was turning to anger. “You could have found him a place with Ser Quincy or Lord Mooton or **someone** . . .”

“I tried,” Gerold said heavily, sitting on the bed next to his wife of twenty years. “Gods witness I tried. But no one’s taking on new sworn swords unless they’re a relation of some sort; what with the wars done and dusted, there’s no need for them. And even if he could find a place,” he went on, “what proper future would that be for him? Spending his years as some petty lord’s tax collector and bone-breaker and nothing but a calloused arse and a pallet in his brother’s hall when he can no longer serve?” He shook his head. “I got this place for the service I gave in the War of the Ninepenny Kings,” he said. “Joren’s as good as I ever was, if not better; he has it in him to become a **lord**, not just a landed knight with a hand of farms for his support. If Robert Baratheon’s giving out lordships in Myr for good service, then it would be a crime not to send Joren off to him.”

Brenda turned a look of dawning comprehension on him. “You **wanted** him to do this?” she asked, her voice dangerously soft.

Gerold held up his hands. “I wanted him to have a better future than I could give him,” he replied defensively. “And the best way to do that was to send him east. But you know Joren, ornery as an old mule since he turned eighteen. The only way I could think of to make him go east was to forbid him. So I did, and gave old Evrard down in the stables orders to lend him a hand if he asked.” He lowered his hands. “It was the only way, love,” he said softly. “I can’t give him the future he
deserves; he has to go and take it. Gods know I did as much and I didn’t do too badly, did I?” he
gesture broadly to indicate both his wife and the small holdfast he ruled.

Brenda stood up. “I accept your explanation,” she said icily. “But hear me, Gerold Potts; I do not
forgive you for driving my son away. Do not think to enter my bed until I do.” She turned and
swept out of the room; Gerold waited until she had closed the door to sigh in relief. All in all, he
reflected, that had gone as well as he had any right to expect.
Eddard peered at his opponent through the vision slits in his visor; he was a tricky one, not terribly fast but tough as an old stump and devious. Eddard’s only consolation was that his opponent was blowing as hard as he was. Fighting in armor was brutally hard work, especially when you pushed yourself to the limit as he was doing; his sword, normally as light and responsive as a live thing, seemed to have quadrupled in weight and his armor weighed on him like the sins of Aerys the Mad.

He set aside his fatigue with an effort of will as his opponent sidled forward, shifted his weight forward, put all his strength into a forehand blow from the guard of the lady as he pushed off his back foot . . . and found himself on the ground with his ears ringing.

“Hold,” came the voice of the master-at-arms. “Kill to Ser Brynden. Set to Ser Brynden, three-one-one.”

Eddard rolled onto his hands and knees and stood, stripping off his basinet and saluting Ser Brynden with his sword. “How’d you do that?” he asked ruefully. “I would have sworn I had you right then.”

“If you’d let me come in another three or four inches, you would have,” Brynden replied as he pulled off his great helm. “As it was I saw you shift your weight forward and I had enough time to sidestep and counter-cut to the back of your head.”

“And put you on the ground with a thoroughly rung bell,” said a voice from the side of the fencing ground as Grand Maester Antony strode forward, clucking. “Honestly, Lord Stark, as important as you are, I must recommend that you take a bit more care in your sparring.” He strode behind Eddard and poked at the back of Eddard’s head. “Tilt your head forward please. Any dizziness, impaired vision, nausea?”

“No, Grand Maester,” Eddard said long-sufferingly; Antony was a worthy man but a worrywart, and somewhat inclined to self-importance. “And it’s a lord’s duty to fight, as we established the other day,” he went on as Antony probed at the base of his skull with light fingers. “It’s not exactly a safe occupation, fighting.”

“I suppose not,” Antony sighed as he finished his inspection. “Call for me if any of the symptoms I just named eventuate, which they probably won’t but might, so. And speaking of establishing things,” he said briskly, “we have run into a difficulty in that regard that requires your intervention, if you can be spared from bashing at the Master of Soldiers with a steel bar.”

Eddard sighed as he turned to the sidelines to find Ser Mychel Egen, Franlan Shipwright, and Maesters Laurens and Yorick, who with Grand Maester Antony were the council charged with developing the laws of the new kingdom. They were only proposals until Robert returned from his progress, but the work still needed to be done; Robert had made clear that he wanted a coherent set of proposals to approve or modify when he returned. “Let’s see,” he said, cudgeling his memory as he handed his sword off to his page and began to strip off his armor. “We’ve covered the rights, duties, and obligations of the nobility, the commons, and the crown, we’ve covered freedom of worship, we’ve covered the absolute illegality of slavery, what are we covering this time?”

“The question of the towns,” said Maester Yorick, a Crownlander with a black goatee that he kept
fussily trimmed. “Specifically whether or not they should be included in the land grants of the nobility, elect their own leadership, or be placed directly under royal rule.”

Eddard grimaced. “Didn’t we decide to put off this discussion until we got more reports on what arrangements Robert was making in the towns?” he asked. “If nothing else, whoever he puts in charge may have more permanent views of their situation.”

“We’ve reviewed the reports from the southern towns and those towns in the eastern territories that His Grace has visited so far,” Antony said, folding his hands in his sleeves, “and we believe that we have sufficient information to base a proposal on.”

“The freedmen must be allowed to elect their own leadership,” Franlan snapped; the feisty dockyard foreman made a point of fighting for every inch of the rights of the commons, which was only fair as that was what he had been appointed to the council to do. His bulky, barrel-chested frame was hunched slightly forward like a boxer’s, his massive arms were folded belligerently, and his gray-white beard bristled out from his florid face. “If we are free, then we must be free to elect our rulers.”

“Even if those rulers turn out to be incompetent?” Mychel asked. “How likely is a craftsman or a merchant to know how to govern?”

“We’ll never know if we don’t find out,” said Maester Laurens. “That said, the first priority must be that the towns be properly governed, and especially that they be governed in such a way that they contribute as much as possible to the defense of the realm. The majority of those taxes that are paid in cash will derive from the towns, after all, and they will be our largest reserve of ready manpower.”

“The scheme we adopted for the recruitment of soldiers can be applied to the towns as well as the country,” Franlan said, his brows knitting. Under that scheme, each lordship was required to provide a certain number of equipped soldiers, the number, type, and equipment of which was stipulated in that lordship’s contract with the royal government, to serve in the Royal Army at the king’s pleasure. “We’ll have to take the same precautions there as we did in the lordships, though, especially for those trades that rely on skilled labor; you don’t make a journeyman carpenter overnight, or a glassblower.”

“How about this,” Eddard said as he began to unbuckle the straps that held his breastplate together. “The power of governance rests with a royally appointed official, like the Wardens, but the freedmen of the town can elect a council of burghers to advise the official.” Eddard’s page stepped forward and took over unbuckling Eddard’s cuirass. “Thank you, Saul,” Eddard said off-handedly; Saul, who had been a child-apprentice in the shipyards before he attached himself to Eddard’s household, blushed fiercely. It had not been the Myrish way to thank their slaves for initiative shown or work well done. “This official, let’s call him a Lord Lieutenant, serves as the mayor of the town, the commander of the garrison, and the chief judge in the town’s court, but all decisions of governance that affect the town as a whole must be made in consultation with the council of burghers.”

“What if this Lord Lieutenant chooses to make decisions that the council does not agree with?” Franlan asked, his brows still knitted. “If he is the lord and commands the garrison, then he will be able to ignore the council’s advice.”

Mychel shrugged. “Then the council can appeal to the king,” he said. “The royal inspectors we’re going to be sending around can visit the towns as easily as the lordships, and they can take down evidence of a Lord Lieutenant’s wrongdoing as easily as a lord’s.” The royal inspectors, an idea of Franlan’s, were slated to be a corps of royal officials who would travel through the realm.
inspecting the state of the fortifications and the military forces, with a side brief of hearing any complaints against a lord made by his smallfolk and collecting any supporting evidence, all of which would be reported to the Master of Laws and the King. It was a massive intrusion of royal power against the traditional prerogatives of the nobility, but Eddard believed that they could justify it on the grounds of necessity; the proper maintenance and training of the realm’s military might was essential to its survival. If the Kingdom of Myr showed weakness, its enemies would drag it down and eat it alive.

As the last of Eddard’s armor came off and Saul began to gather it up to take it away and polish it, Eddard settled his knight’s belt of linked steel plates, a gift from his foster-father, around his hips. “Sounds fair to me,” he said, closing the belt by slipping a pin into a trio of steel rings set behind one of the plates. “Any objections?” As heads shook all around, Franlan’s reluctantly, Eddard shrugged. “All right then, write it up and we’ll put it in the list. Anything else?”

“Now that you mention it,” Yorick said slowly, making Eddard stifle a groan. It bode fair to be a very long day.

XXX

Ser Leofric Corbray, formerly the Lord of Heart’s Home and now a simple knight again, stifled a groan of relief as the High Septon wound down the ceremony. He and more than a score of other knights, volunteers to serve in the gods’ cause in Essos, had petitioned the High Septon to bless them before their departure and the mouthpiece of the gods on earth hadn’t been able to pass up the opportunity for ceremony. The spectacle of almost thirty knights, kneeling in full armor and holding their swords across their hands while the High Septon invoked the favor of the gods upon them, recalled the days of the Faith Militant, and Leofric had started wondering if doing this sort of thing in public was entirely wise. Jon Arryn was being enough of a stick in the mud already, refusing to let any who held titles or lands of King Stannis go east-over-sea to fight in the holy cause without renouncing their titles and lands, without having fears of a resurrected Faith Militant put in his head.

But the majority of his relief was for himself. He was more than fifty years old and kneeling for a prolonged period of time in full armor was painful even for a young man; Leofric’s knees felt like someone had put them in a vise where the edges of his greaves and poleyns had dug into his flesh through his arming trousers. His back ached from the weight of his cuirass and pauldrons, and the effort of holding the almost three pounds of Valyrian steel that Lady Forlorn represented across his extended hands was taking a toll on his arms, which were further encumbered by the weight of gauntlets, vambraces, couters, and rerebraces. Only stubborn pride had kept his arms from trembling. He might be old enough to have sired any of the other knights with him, but he was still the scion of one of the oldest and most martial houses of the Vale, the cradle of Westerosi chivalry; he would not betray weakness.

At least the day wasn’t too hot. Wearing full plate on a hot day was roughly akin to wearing an oven.

Finally the High Septon ended the ceremony, the final amen was said, and the knights were allowed to stand and sheathe their swords. As Leofric turned away, he was approached by a monk and, after a whispered conversation, ushered into the vestry of the Great Sept for a private word with the High Septon, who received him very informally with only a single septon in attendance who served them both an exceptional wine before standing at the High Septon’s left hand.

“We wish to begin, Ser Leofric,” the High Septon began, “by commending you for your piety. The Book of the Smith commands us to serve the gods and do good works without thought of cost, but
we find that it is regarded as less a commandment and more a mild suggestion. For you to make such sacrifices as you have already made in the service of the gods does you great honor.”

Leofric bowed. “I but serve the gods as best I may, Your Holiness,” he replied. “And in my circumstances, the sacrifice is not as onerous as it might be to others.” Lyonel had been ready to take up the reins of lordship for some time now, and Lyn held a post of high honor in the service of King Robert by all accounts. Lucas had to remain in Heart’s Home to serve as Lyonel’s heir until he bore a son, thanks to the royal decree, almost certainly devised by Jon Arryn, that no man who held a title or office under King Robert could inherit in the lands of King Stannis, but Leofric had little concern in that regard. Whatever befell, his House’s future was well provided-for.

As far as Leofric’s own concerns went, the simple fact was that he was growing old. His knees, back, and wrists ached even when he didn’t wear armor and it was long years since his hair had been any color other than grey. Three-score and ten were the appointed years of a man, or so said the Book of the Father, and Leofric had less than twenty of those years left. If he could spend those years in a knightly venture, serving a cause the gods clearly favored, and die sword in hand in a ring of his slain as a knight should, he would die content.

“If that is so, then perhaps we might induce you to perform a small service for us?” the High Septon asked lightly, making Leofric blink. If the High Septon wanted something that the Faith could not provide for him, then properly speaking he should make the request of King Stannis; for him to approach Leofric, who was preparing to renounce his allegiance to Stannis, was more than a little irregular.

But Leofric was a dutiful son of the Faith, so he gestured acceptance. “Name this service and I shall see it done, Your Holiness,” he said confidently.

“When the Sunset Company first sailed,” the High Septon said, leaning back in his chair, “we took the liberty of dispatching seven septons with it to attend to the spiritual needs of the men. Among them was a Septon Jonothor,” the High Septon sighed. “He was an exceptional student at seminary, but very difficult; he burned with zeal for the Faith, and tended to allow that zeal to overcome his reason. He was deemed too, shall we say, prickly to assign to a noble household, so he was given a parish in Flea Bottom in the hopes that it would teach him humility. Unfortunately his zeal seemed to burn all the more brightly and be all the more misdirected, especially in upbraiding his fellow clergy.” The High Septon smiled slightly. “Among other things he all but accused one of his fellow septons of hubris and commanded him to repent, lest tragedy befall him. In fairness the septon in question was in error, but Jonothor overstepped the bounds of his office in issuing him a command he did not have the authority to give.”

Leofric nodded; he was beginning to see why this Jonothor had been sent with the Sunset Company. “It was decided,” the High Septon continued, “that Jonothor should be sent to Essos with the company, in order that he might gain some perspective. We have since heard much of him that redounds to the credit of the Faith; apparently when the freedmen were repulsed from the walls of Myr it was Jonothor who rallied them with the power of scripture. However,” the High Septon’s face tightened, as if he found what he had to say next distasteful, “we have also heard much that gives us cause to fear that Jonothor has fallen into error, and strayed from the teachings of the Faith.” He gestured to the septon standing next to his chair. “Consequently, we shall be dispatching Septon Jaspar and a small party of other septons to investigate Jonothor’s activities and compile any evidence of error or wrongdoing. We would esteem it as a favor, Ser Leofric, if you were to place yourself and your knights at Septon Jaspar’s disposal if he should have need of your assistance.”

Leofric frowned. These were rapidly becoming deep waters. “With all respect, Your Holiness,” he
asked tentatively, “is that entirely legal? Or, for that matter, wise? If this Septon Jonothor has fallen
into error, then surely all that will be needed will be for Your Holiness to command King Robert to
arrest him and transport him here to King’s Landing to face a trial. Pardon my bluntness, but to
bypass King Robert in this fashion would give the impression that you do not trust him to obey
such a command, which would be no small insult to a good son of the Faith.”

“We are reliably informed that Septon Jonothor is held in the highest esteem by King Robert,” the
High Septon answered. “Indeed, it was Jonothor who officiated at his coronation and placed the
crown on his head. And King Robert’s loyalty to those he considers his friends is well-known. To
force him to choose between one he considers a friend and our good regard for him and his
kingdom seems to us to be most impolite.” The High Septon spread his hands. “By employing you
as our hand in this matter, we would be granting Robert the option of simply turning aside, instead
of insisting that he clap Jonothor in irons with his own hands. But this is somewhat premature,” the
High Septon said, a placating tone entering his voice. “It is possible that our information is
mistaken and the need to arrest Jonothor will not arise. Tales grow in the telling, after all.”

Leofric nodded. “As I am sure Your Holiness would be made even more aware of than you are
now, if you passed the time with any fishermen,” he said politely, drawing a laugh from the High
Septon as he thought furiously. More than being an insult to Robert on the High Septon’s behalf,
carrying out this mission would be tantamount to committing treason against his new king and
declaring the Faith Militant reborn. That was a step that even the boldest would hesitate to take,
and while Leofric knew himself to be brave, he was not suicidal.

And even if Leofric and his knights were able to extradite this rogue septon to King’s Landing by
force or by guile, would Stannis accept the Faith’s complaint and order his Master of Laws to bring
charges? By all reports there wasn’t much love lost between the two brothers, but countenancing
the kidnapping of a favored cleric and prosecuting him for heresy was at the very least a deadly
insult, if not an act of war. Far less trouble, and far more convenient, to return the cleric with a
letter of apology and the heads of the kidnappers in a box.

On the other hand, Leofric was a man of his word, and he had already said that he would carry out
whatever service the High Septon might ask of him. *Let this be a lesson to you, old son, about
remembering to look before you leap,* he chided himself as he bowed. “I accept this mission, Your
Holiness,” he said formally.

Leofric spent much of his remaining time in King’s Landing, and of the voyage to Myr, praying
that this Septon Jonothor fellow had done nothing to warrant the ire of the High Septon.
Robert read over the missive that had arrived that afternoon by fast ship from King’s Landing and dispatch rider from Myr city to find them three days ride from Ceralia and smiled. “I’ll be damned,” he said happily. “I’m an uncle.”

Jaime glanced over. “Cersei’s had a child?” he asked.

“Lyonel Baratheon, a fine fat bouncing baby boy with Stannis’ hair and eyes,” Robert replied, chuckling. “I’ll have to send the sourpuss a letter with my congratulations when we get back to Myr. About time he had a child, maybe it’ll liven him up a bit.” He glanced at Jaime. “Your sister’s doing well, according to this,” he said. “No fever, no hemorrhage. She should be back to queening it around the Red Keep in no time.”

Jaime blew his cheeks out in relief as he signed himself with the seven-pointed star. Childbirth was dangerous even for a woman with the finest maesters in Westeros at hand, but if any woman would come through it with flying colors, Cersei would. If nothing else she would just decree it; Child, be born, and the child would come quietly if it knew what was good for it.

“Once your exile’s over we’ll have to send you back on the next ship,” Robert said. “The boy will have to know his uncle of course. And I don’t care what Stannis says, his boy will be lucky to have your sword at his service.”

“So eager to get rid of me, Your Grace?” Jaime asked teasingly. “I promise you’re safe from me.”

Robert threw his head back and laughed. “As for that, if you ever get the notion to try and add another king to your tally then I am, as they say, at your service,” he said, his eyes twinkling with mirth and a touch of challenge. “But you’ll be wanting to go back to Westeros anyway; if nothing else your father will be wanting his heir back. And if I kept you from inheriting Casterly Rock, I’d deserve whatever you tried to give me. Who wouldn’t want to be the richest lord in Westeros?”

One who didn’t want to live with what his father did, Jaime thought but didn’t say. Aerys he had no tears for, but the others . . . Queen Rhaella had done nothing to deserve her fate, any more than Princess Elia had. He had played with little Rhaenys when duty would allow it, and Aegon had been a babe at the breast. He had only discussed it with his father once, and the memory still rankled; he could still hear his father lecturing him on honor, duty, and necessity in that cold, stony voice of his. That conversation had ended with Jaime storming out of the room and refusing to speak to his father again until the day before the company sailed. Aloud he said, “Someone who wanted to do more than sit in his hall and count coppers,” gesturing at the land around them. “In Casterly Rock I’d be talking to merchants and listening to my lords complain about how things were so much better in my father’s day. Here I can do what the gods made me to do.”

Robert cocked an eyebrow. “Is that you talking or Septon Jonothor?” he asked. “I hadn’t figured you for being more than usually devout, but I’ve seen you at his services since Myr. Nothing wrong with that of course,” he added hastily, “nothing at all; Jonothor’s a good man for a septon. But if Jonothor’s trying to suborn my knights, I need to know.”

Jaime waved a hand. “It’s nothing like that at all,” he replied. “I’ll admit that Jonothor’s certainty is refreshing, but it’s not the only reason I want to remain here.” He poked a thumb over his shoulder towards the village they had stopped for luncheon in. “The people back there hadn’t
heard the name of Lannister before I came through; in Westeros everyone and their pig knows of House Lannister, and most of them know of my father, if only by reputation.” Especially after King’s Landing hung in the air unsaid as Jaime shrugged. “Live your whole life in someone’s shadow, you’ll do a lot to get a place in the sun, Your Grace.”

Robert narrowed his eyes speculatively as Jaime subsided. He wasn’t used to talking about this sort of thing and a feeling of mild embarrassment settled on him. “I’ll try to keep that in mind,” Robert said slowly. “Although it may be a bit late in my case.” Robert shrugged. “I’ll send you back to King’s Landing after your exile’s over anyway, if only for a time,” he said. “I’ll need someone to tell my nephew about me who can be relied on to tell him the truth.”

Jaime blinked, then ducked his head as the import of what Robert just said hit him. “Your Grace does me too much honor,” he said.

Robert waved a hand. “You saved Ned’s life at Tara,” he said airily. “I’ll be the judge of how much honor you are owed. Now about these cavalry companies we were talking about, to support the legions . . . “

XXX

The longship nosing up the quay got Victarion’s eye and made him break off his conversation with Franlan about the design of a new type of galley. He knew every longship in the Royal Fleet of Myr by sight, and this one wasn’t one of them. It was familiar to him, however; he had seen it among his father’s fleet before he sailed from Pyke to join the Sunset Company. Given that it was flying the banner of House Greyjoy from the masthead, and that the sails were also emblazoned with the golden kraken, it had to be here on official business.

His suspicions confirmed by the sight of the man who jumped from the deck to the quay, Victarion excused himself and strode over to embrace the newcomer. “Aeron, by the gods!” he roared happily. “Finally visiting your brother, eh? What news from the Isles?”

Aeron returned the embrace, pounding on Victarion’s back. “Good to see you too brother,” he exclaimed before whispering in Victarion’s ear, “and I do have news from the Isles; news that I’m only supposed to tell to you.”

Victarion blinked, sneaking about had never been Aeron’s style, and broke the embrace. “Come,” he said loudly, “join me in my cabin for a glass! Best wine this side of the Arbor, we’ve got, and all the better for having paid the iron price for it!”

A few minutes later, with Franlan taking charge of seeing to Aeron’s crew and cargo, the two brothers were secluded in Victarion’s cabin aboard the Iron Storm and sharing a flagon of Myrish wine. After exchanging the news of the sea, the gossip of weather and ships and currents that was the common language of seafarers the world over, Aeron put down his goblet and leaned forward. “The first of my news is ill, brother,” he said seriously. “Our father is dead.”

Victarion nodded. “I’ve heard,” he said soberly, recalling the grief that had overtaken him. “A trader brought the news three sennights ago of his death in battle on the coast of Dorne.” He raised his goblet. “What is dead may never die,” he said, in the old language of the Isles that had survived only for the ceremonies of the Drowned God’s faith and the most ancient of poetry and song.

“But rises again, harder and stronger,” Aeron replied in the same language before switching back to Common Tongue. “Balon has taken the Seastone Chair and been acclaimed as Lord of the Isles. He wants you and the other Ironborn with you to return to the Isles as swiftly as you may.”
Victarion sat back, his jaw dropping as the full weight of what Aeron had said hit him. “But that is impossible,” he said finally. “We are the backbone of the Royal Fleet. If we left, then the kingdom would be naked on the seas.”

Aeron shrugged. “So get these greenlanders to build and man their own ships and get the Master of Ships here to release you from service,” he said in a voice that indicated how little he cared one way or the other. “Shouldn’t be too difficult, greenlanders never properly value our services anyway.”

Victarion spread his hands. “I am the Master of Ships,” he said simply.

Aeron straightened in his seat, blinking rapidly, jaw dropping, clearly stunned. “Oh,” he said after a long moment. “I see. Congratulations.” Shaking his head, he leaned forward again. “Nevertheless, brother, Balon wants you and your men back as quickly as you can sail. He says he needs you to hold the Isles.”

“Are the other lords in rebellion?” Victarion asked. Discontent among the ironborn lords wasn’t unprecedented, but outright rebellion almost certainly was; Victarion hadn’t paid much attention when his father’s maester had tried to teach him history.

“No,” Aeron admitted, “but Balon fears they might, if something doesn’t change. You know that Father’s reforms were not exactly welcomed.”

Victarion shrugged. “If the lords don’t like what Balon’s doing, then they’re welcome to join us here,” he said, gesturing at the walls of his cabin to indicate the harbor outside. “The god knows we need every ship and sailor we can get, and there’s no shortage of enemies to pay the iron price to. The Tyroshi sent an emissary just the other sennight telling us to stop freeing their slaves on pain of war.” He barked a laugh. “If he hadn’t been an emissary under flag of truce, I think Stark would have cut him down on the spot. As it was he told the emissary that he was giving him until sundown to leave the city and that he was freeing all the slaves the man had brought with him. I thought the man was going to have a, a, what do the maesters call it when a blood vessel in your brain explodes?”

Aeron shrugged. “Aneurysm, I think?” he said, sounding out the word hesitantly. “But that’s beside the point,” he said more seriously. “Uncle Rodrik said you might find it difficult to leave, but Balon said he didn’t care. He wants you and your men home. All your men.”

Victarion cocked an eyebrow. “Assuming that I could do what Balon is telling me to do,” he said, “why would I want to? Can Balon give me command of a fleet with license to paint the seas red with blood and take as much treasure as I please? Can he give me comrades like the freedmen my men are training to be sailors? Can he give me a war the likes of which no Ironborn has fought since Dagon Greyjoy’s day?” He spread his hands. “There’s nothing Balon can give me that I can’t pay the iron price for here, brother. And even if that weren’t so,” he went on, “I can’t hold any titles or lands in Westeros now anyway, not since Stannis’ decree.”

Aeron waved a hand dismissively. “And since when have the sons of the sea cared for the decrees of greenlanders?” he asked. “I can tell you already that Balon doesn’t.” He looked Victarion in the eye. “Brother,” he said seriously, “you might serve Robert, but Balon is your lord as well as your brother. And he told me to tell you that this isn’t a request, it’s a command. If you don’t obey it, then you won’t be welcome home.”

Victarion stiffened. “And what,” he said slowly, leaning forward as he did so, “gives Balon the right to command me? I am sworn to King Robert of Myr, may the Drowned God grant him strength and glory, and with the Drowned God as my witness I swear that I have never sworn any
oath of fealty to Balon. For him to presume on my loyalty like this is very near to an insult.”

Aeron stood his ground. “Balon is your rightful lord,” he said stubbornly, “and for you to refuse his commands is treason.”

Victarion’s hand tightened on his goblet until his fingers left dents in the soft gold. ”Get out, brother,” he snarled, his fighting blood singing softly in his ears, “before I forget the tie of blood between us. And tell Balon that he can take his commands and shove them up his weak arse.”

As Aeron strode out of the cabin, Victarion glared at the door for a long minute before throwing his goblet at it in a spasm of fury that also saw him upend the table and break one of his chairs. When he finally calmed down, he walked out of his cabin, down the gangplank, and summoned those of his captains who were still in the port. He had some talking to do, although he would much rather charge a company of spearmen.

XXX

There were times when Tregano Baholis, Chief Justiciar of Pentos in the name of His Excellency the Sealord and the Council of Thirty, dearly wished he could swear. Unfortunately, as the viceroy-in-all-but-name of the largest of Braavos’ overseas possessions, he was required to project a certain gravitas that would be entirely overthrown if he employed any of the curses that he had picked up as a young man during the three years he had spent on his father’s ships. For one of his position to swear, or jump up and down, or even scowl, was unbecoming.

So as Tregano looked down at the sea of felt tents spread out before the walls of the city, the most reaction he could allow himself was a slight pursing of the lips and a soft drawl of “Hmm. How vexing.”

Damn it, everything had been going so well! The conquest had removed enough of the Pentoshi aristocracy that the remainder had not dared to do more than mutter, especially once the first companies of freedmen had been inducted into Braavosi service and trained by the remains of the Company of the Rose; the heads of the Prince of Pentos and the Council of Magisters on their pikes over the gates of the city provided a warning of the consequences of failed rebellion. A cadastral survey had been undertaken and the estates of the magisters broken up into smaller communal farms each worked by a dozen families or so; full productivity wasn’t expected for another two or three years, but it served to bind the freedmen’s hearts to the Titan with bands of iron. The ‘Little Arsenal’ was already half-built and a squadron of the Braavosi fleet had been stationed in Pentos in anticipation of it being completed. Braavosi ships sailing out of Pentos had been making money hand over fist transporting Westerosi to Myr, and a few of those Westerosi had taken service with the Sealord and now made up a respectable fraction of Pentos city’s garrison; some had been attracted by Lord Merryweather, who was now King Stannis’ representative in the city of Pentos, while others were simply less enterprising or less bloodthirsty. He had been considering dispatching an expedition to Ghoyan Drohe to establish an outpost with a view to securing the country there for further expansion.

But the arrival of the Dothraki endangered all those plans. Braavos ordinarily had little to do with the horse-lords; a combination of a low but nonetheless significant mountain range separating Braavos’ mainland possessions from the Dothraki Sea and Braavos’ general remoteness from the Dothraki’s usual hunting grounds meant that it was a rare khalasar indeed that ventured anywhere near Braavos. But the Flatlands were regularly visited by the nomads, and while it would be an infamous capitulation to pay tribute to slavers, as the Dothraki were, provoking a war with the Dothraki would be potentially disastrous. Pentos city would be relatively safe with its walls and its garrison, but the hinterland would be all but indefensible against the nomad cavalry. The towns all
had at least a wooden palisade and rudimentary stockpiles of food, but none of them were able to withstand even a mid-sized khalasar; the Dothraki considered it demeaning to fight on foot, but if they were sufficiently inflamed they would do so anyway, and if their siegecraft had deteriorated since the Sarnori wars it was not altogether non-existent. Only Pentos city had walls of sufficient strength and a garrison of sufficient size to withstand an assault. Moreover almost all of the armed forces of Braavos present in Pentos were infantry; good infantry, admittedly, if Tregano said so himself, but infantry nonetheless. Infantry could not hope to catch a khalasar that didn’t want to be caught and the two hundred cavalry that Tregano had at his disposal would almost certainly be massacred if they tried to fight a khalasar that, as far as Tregano could tell, numbered at least twenty thousand and possibly as many as thirty thousand.

So while Tregano had considered disobeying the Sealord’s orders to reach an accommodation with the Dothraki, he hadn’t considered it for very long. For one thing, he was a loyal servant of the republic. For another, attempting to offer resistance would be suicidal. As a party of Dothraki riders cantered towards the Sunrise Gate, Tregano swallowed his disgust and walked down to the gate to meet them.
Nits Make Lice

The year 285 ended well for the Kingdom of Myr. Along the southern frontier Lyn Corbray’s raiding spree had effectively neutered Lys and Tyrosh’s ability to launch an invasion by land. Victarion Greyjoy and Brynden Tully’s expansion of the Royal Fleet and the Royal Army proceeded apace, although Brynden reported much swifter progress than Victarion due to the comparative ease of training soldiers. And on the last day of the year King Robert returned to Myr city in triumph, leaving behind him a pacified countryside and a populace whose feelings about their new government ranged from neutral acceptance to fervent enthusiasm. Five days later, heralds issued from the Palace of Justice to announce the ratification of the Great Charter.

This charter, since described as the founding document of Westerosi-style constitutionalism, was in fact much less radical than its proponents have made it out to be. Of the seventy clauses in the charter, only three established institutions that were even remotely democratic, and those were sharply limited; the council of burghers of each chartered town was limited to an advisory role, as was the council of burghers of the city of Myr, while the Council of Commons only had oversight authority over investigations of nobles and knights who were accused of failing to meet their Charter obligations. If the Great Charter was a pioneering document it was in only two senses. Firstly, it spelled out in explicit language the implicit social contract of feudalism; although exemptions from military service away from their places of residence were granted to certain groups of smallfolk such as skilled craftsmen, no such exemptions existed for the nobility or the chivalry. Every able-bodied male of military age and either noble or knightly rank was obligated to serve at the king’s pleasure when summoned, although they were entitled to receive pay commensurate to their rank after forty days. Secondly, it laid the foundations of the authoritarian garrison state that so many latter-day dictators would attempt to copy.

The need for such a system of government and social control was made brutally apparent a month later, with the launch of the First Slave War . . .

- Freedom or Death: An Overview of the Slave Wars by Maester Julian, published 2182 AC

The village on the coast west of Myr was so small it hardly had a name, and certainly not one widely known to outsiders. It boasted only two dozen families, all of whom made their living by a mixture of fishing and truck gardening and none of whom were rich enough to own slaves. They had known virtually nothing of the war except terrifying rumor, but the older and wiser heads of the village had counseled against fear; who would bother with a village as small and as poor as theirs? Even if the rider who had come from Myr city had told the truth when he told them that the Conclave was overthrown and they now had a king, surely he had more important things to worry about than one little fishing village with no wealth to speak of.

And, in large part, their predictions had come true. Aside from that one rider and another who came later to read out the new laws of the kingdom and nail a parchment copy to the door of the boatshed (somewhat pointlessly as no one in the village could read) their new king had left them alone. Life in the village had gone on as it had for as long as anyone could remember, with its endless round of fishing, gardening, the myriad of chores that life in a fishing village entailed, and the usual intricacies of life among so few people is such remote circumstances.

Until the day the raiders came.
The sight of a pair of galleys rounding the headland out of the setting sun had initially been interesting but ultimately nonthreatening; the village had never been visited by a vessel larger than their fishing smacks. When they had descended on the boats returning from a day on the waves and begun to bombard them with crossbow bolts, sling-stones, and javelins, the immediate reaction had been shock. Surely there had been some mistake. But when the galleys beached and soldiers began to disembark and storm up the shingle to the village, shock had turned to terror. The village boasted no weapons more threatening than the harpoons some of the men used to take sturgeon or seal or porpoise and the knives with which the fishermen cleaned and dressed their daily catch, and the men that might have led the resistance were now dead in their boats or turning the surf pink with their blood.

So when the raiders reached the village, only those with the presence of mind to flee without hesitating escaped. For the rest what took place was akin to the end of the world. Armored soldiers with spears and swords rampaged through the village. Any woman of nubile age that they came across was raped and killed, and sometimes not in that order; the old, the very young, and the infirm were simply killed. The one-room cottages that the villagers had lived in were ransacked for any valuables (fruitlessly, in most cases) and then burned.

Under ordinary circumstances, there would have been less in the way of outright murder; alive an unskilled slave could be worth anywhere between ten and seventy silver ducats in the Tyroshi slave markets, while a dead one could only be sold for half a copper denier a pound as fishbait. But half of the raiders were Myrish exiles, seamen who had been abroad when their city was stormed, and with their families almost certainly destroyed and themselves cast adrift on the tides of fate with barely a florin to their names they burned for revenge. Indeed they had refused to sail with their Tyroshi hosts against the Andal invaders unless the Tyroshi pledged to take no prisoners or slaves. Partly this was to prevent the Tyroshi from profiting at Myr’s expense but mostly it was driven by unreasoning fury, both against the Andals and against the slaves who had joined them.

As one Myrish captain had told the Archon, “Nits make lice.”

The fact that the inhabitants of the village were not liberated slaves, had had nothing to do with the Andals, and had been some of the most inoffensive people in the world did not signify. The only thing that mattered to their executioners was that they had not fought against the Andal invasion and accepted King Robert’s rule.

By the time the raiders departed and the four survivors crept back, all that remained of the village was dead bodies and burned homes.

XXX

Jaime Lannister turned in the saddle, glanced out to sea for the tenth time in the past hour, and mentally thanked the gods that he saw no sails on the horizon. The coastal road, which linked Myr city to the towns of Celsa, Navio, and Cillium on the Tyroshi border, ran within long bowshot of the shore for long stretches, and according to Lord Franlan the coasts of the Sea of Myrth were almost perfect for beaching galleys with their gentle shelving and generally shallow tides. Consequently the whole Myrish littoral was vulnerable to the raiding squadrons of the slavers, except for those stretches of coastline that had a squadron of the Royal Fleet cruising directly off them.

The slavers, curse them, had gotten smart. They weren’t trying to match the Royal Army strength to strength; indeed they had evacuated the population of their own borderlands to more secure locations deep within their mainland holdings and stripped them of any resources that might support an army. Almost the only thing they hadn’t done was try and stop up the springs. With
their terrestrial holdings reasonably safe behind the devastated zone of the borders and the walls of their towns, the slavers had unleashed their fleets with orders to scour the Myrish coast of human life. The regular navies of Tyrosh and Lys led the flotillas, backed by Myrish exiles, sellsails, and even, Uncle Gerion had heard, a squadron of volunteer ships from Volantis who had joined for the chance of plunder and slaves. These ships were ranging the length and breadth of the Sea of Myrth, which the Archon of Tyrosh and the Lyseni Conclave had declared closed to all shipping bound for Myr. Victarion Greyjoy, after consultations with Lord Franlan, Ser Brynden, and King Robert, had opted to entrust the naval defense of Myr city to the city’s fortifications and taken the twenty longships and ten galleys of the Royal Fleet out to patrol the coast. He couldn’t hope to defeat the main body of the enemy fleets in battle, but at the very least he could snap up some of the smaller raiding squadrons and ships foolish enough to sail alone, which by all accounts he was doing with admirable zeal.

But the overriding concern to preserve the fleet as an entity meant that the fleet had to stay together, and even if the fleet had been dispersed they were so few that they could not patrol even half of the coast. So Robert had taken six thousand men, half the Royal Army, and marched out of the city to do what he could for the coastlands. For the most part that meant rounding up the populations of every small village and hamlet within a day’s march of the coast and herding them into Myr city or one of the towns, where they could be protected behind stone walls and a garrison. Robert had taken half the relief force and marched up the northward-running part of the coast and given Jaime the other half to clear the western shore.

Jaime hated it. The simple fact was that withdrawing the population into the towns like this was an admission that the kingdom could not adequately defend its own coastline. The only good thing that could be said for the strategy was that it protected the people, who were the most precious resource the kingdom had, and demonstrated to them that kingdom took their safety seriously; while there had been some difficulties posed by the influx of hundreds of people with no more possessions than those they could carry on their backs, the young men had flooded into the ranks of the Iron Legions. It also provided new arrivals from Westeros with reason to hate the slavers; twice now Jaime’s column had come across a village that had been devastated by the raiders before the Army had arrived, and the sight of women and children left to rot unburied was enough to harden anyone’s heart against the perpetrator. One young volunteer, a brash young man named Joren Potts, had led a clutch of other youngsters of a similar age in swearing a mighty oath to leave not one stone atop another when Tyrosh was taken.

Jaime snorted in sudden humor. A fine thing for him to call someone youngster, at the hoary old age of twenty; Joren was barely three years his junior. Of course, few of the volunteers had ever been in a battle to equal Tara or the taking of Myr. Most of the older ones had fought in the War of the Ninepenny Kings, and some had fought in Dorne during the recent rebellion, but otherwise the only wars in Westeros had been the armed pissing matches that the minor lords engaged in to better define the pecking order. Set against the wars here, those squabbles were swiftly revealed for the petty affairs that they were.

Jaime flicked his eyes out to sea and scanned the horizon again, snarling to himself in the privacy of his mind as he did so. This feeling of vulnerability was a new experience for him and he already hated it as much as conceding the advantage to the enemy.

After the initial storm of coastal raiding, the pace of the war slowed to a crawl. The sequestration of the coast’s inhabitants into the fortified towns starved the slaver fleets of easy targets, and the strength of those towns’ garrisons and fortifications, along with the companies of the Royal Army that marched from town to town along the coastal road, precluded any attempt at assaulting them. And in any case, the slavers were only loosely allied by their common enmity and lacked the cohesion and communications technology that would have been necessary to concentrate their
forces and attempt to take one of the towns by storm.

On the other hand, the Kingdom of Myr could not force the slaver fleets to abandon the Sea of Myrth. The Royal Fleet simply did not have the numbers to attempt a decisive engagement; against the almost four hundred galleys and dromonds that the slavers had put into the Sea of Myrth, Victarion could muster only twenty longships and ten galleys, and the danger posed by the enemy’s control of the Sea of Myrth prevented the training of new crews. The best Victarion could do was prowl along the coast and attempt to pick off any raiders foolish enough to be caught at a disadvantage.

The stalemate that this set of circumstances engendered, with neither of the two belligerents able to strike a decisive blow at each other, is almost certainly the origin of the phrase “turtle war”, which in later years would acquire the unspoken connotations of either cowardice or impotence, depending on the commentator. In the First Slave War, it was a policy that the Kingdom of Myr was forced to adopt out of necessity, and which in the absence of outside influence would only have been brought to an end by the exhaustion of the combatants.

However, no human activity is undertaken in a vacuum, and the First Slave War was no exception . . .

- *Storm and Fury: The Battle for the Center of the World* by Maester Barnabas, published 2036.
The First Slave War affected not only the immediate combatants but societies hundreds of miles away. The quadrilateral formed by Lys, Tyrosh, Planky Town, and Stonehelm was the crossroads between two worlds, that of the Narrow Sea and that of Slaver’s Bay. Through that quadrilateral passed timber, pelts, grain, cloth, wine, peppers, and salt from Westeros, Braavosi dyes and manufactures, Pentoshi cheeses and jewelry, Lyseni tapestries and perfumes, Tyroshi armor and pear brandy, and, before the war, Myrish lace, carpets, lenses, and glassware, all shipped eastward to Volantis and the cities of Slaver’s Bay. As they did so they passed silk, spice, gems, and other rarities that had originated in the Jade Sea and been brought west by Volantene, Ghiscari, and Qartheen merchants, although the value of these transshipped luxury goods was dwarfed by the convoys of slave ships that were the true lifeblood of trade east of the Narrow Sea.

The war had disrupted this web of trade to an unsettling degree. Although most of the naval fighting was restricted to the Sea of Myrth, the Myrish exiles who made up almost a third of the allied fleets proved unwilling to restrain themselves and expanded the naval war beyond Myrish waters. A much-talked-about plan to sack King’s Landing in revenge for the Sunset Company’s sailing to Essos came to nothing, but raids on the coasts of Dorne and the Stormlands became more frequent and more savage with every month that the stalemate in the Sea of Myrth progressed, while Westerosi ships were only safe from attack if they sailed in convoy with a naval escort either from the royal fleet or the Braavosian Navy. This undeclared war was the proving ground for Stannis’ new fleet and the making of the reputations of a generation of new Westerosi captains, most notably Euron Greyjoy.

It was this disruption to trade that aroused the interest of the Seven Kingdoms and, more importantly, of Braavos. The Bastard Daughter of Valyria relied on trade as no other society did in those years, for its hinterland barely produced enough food to feed its population. It was trade that provided the money necessary to buy the grain, meat, fish, and other foodstuffs necessary to provide the level of sustenance that Braavos’ citizens were accustomed to, and trade that paid for the fleet that guarded the ships those foodstuffs arrived in. Indeed it was that same reliance on foreign food, procured at reasonable prices at reliable times, that had partially driven the conquest of Pentos; the abolitionist cause had provided an undeniable moral justification, but the Pentoshi hinterland was far more fertile than Braavos’, and an analysis of documents from the 270s and early 280s shows a slow, but nonetheless steady increase in the price of Pentoshi grain.

So when Stannis sent an embassy to Braavos under the leadership of Lord Arryn, he found a receptive audience both in the Council of Thirty and in the keyholders of the Iron Bank, which had been forced to increase its insurance rates for vessels traveling in the southern Narrow Sea. But while Lord Arryn conferred with the Sealord, another piece was entering the gameboard . . .

- Chasing Dragons: The Sunset Company Reexamined by Maester Hendricus, published 1539 AC

Ser Rickon looked over the organized chaos of the docks and nodded. “All in order, then, my lord?” he asked.

“Aye,” rumbled Erik Ironmaker, who by virtue of his reputation and his standing as the only lord to have sailed with the fleet bound for Myr had assumed command. “The Dornishmen gouged us for every copper they could, but we have water and provisions enough to get us to Myr, at least.”
“Speaking of which, word just reached us from King’s Landing,” Rickon said. “The rumors that Lord Castellan Euron reported from Ghaston Grey are confirmed; Lys and Tyrosh have declared war on the Kingdom of Myr.”

Erik threw his head back and laughed. “Excellent!” he shouted. “We’ll catch them between the hammer and the anvil, by the god!” He rubbed his hands with an expression of gleeful anticipation. “Let the Tyroshi look to their oars and their blades, if they want to keep the seas to themselves.”

“Are you sure you’ll be able to get through?” Rickon asked carefully. “I mean no disrespect, my lord, but not all of the people in your fleet are warriors.” Indeed from where he and Lord Ironmaker were standing he could see at least three Ironborn women, one of whom was either unfortunately chubby or else in the early stages of pregnancy.

Erik waved a hand. “The women knew the risks when they shipped out with us,” he said. “And our women are not so soft as yours, greenlander. All true children of the Isles have iron in their bones.”

Rickon gestured acceptance; the thought of women deliberately going into danger made him mildly nauseous, but he didn’t have command in this matter; best to let Erik do as he deemed best. “I’ll admit when I heard how many of you had come, I thought the Commander here was lying to me,” he said, gesturing at the fleet that filled the harbor of Planky Town. One hundred longships, like so many floating daggers, bobbed alongside the piers, along with a dozen fatter knarrs that were being steadily filled with provisions and water casks under the watchful eyes of their captains. Altogether there were just over eight thousand Ironborn milling around the harborside, and the majority of them were either young men no older than their early twenties, or older men a decade or two younger than Erik; old and young alike were armed to the teeth with spears, axes, long and heavy-bladed knives, a few swords and hammers, and the round central-bossed shields that the Ironborn favored. Thank the gods that the avarice of the Dornish merchants hadn’t resulted in violence, although the expressions of relief and glee evident on every merchant’s face may have gone some way to reducing tensions; Planky Town had seen little commerce for the past several months, and every household had been feeling the pinch. The opportunity to buy and sell with a fleet of Ironborn must have seemed like a miracle. “Now I’m just amazed that Lord Balon can spare so many fighting men.”

Erik spat off the side of the dock into the water. “That, for Balon,” he said darkly. “The fool tried to forbid our sailing, as if we were greenlanders to be penned like cattle. If we hadn’t needed to catch the tide, I’d have broken his jaw then and there. No, ser knight, you’ll find little enough love for Balon among us.” He gestured at his countrymen. “Some of the youngsters are newlyweds looking for a better life than they can find on the Isles, trying to scratch a living out of the soil like thralls or feed a family with only a small fishing boat. Others are young men hoping to take enough gold for a bride-price, or the fame to seek a wife at all. The older men are mostly old salts who’re too restless to farm or fish and were just this side of pirates before they joined us. For my own part,” the old Ironborn lord turned to face Rickon, his white hair and his scarred, weathered face giving him the look of some sea-god’s idol brought to life. “I am old, ser knight,” he said simply, “so old that I sailed with Dagon Greyjoy in my youth, and was a friend to those who also sailed with him. Ah, those were men, ser knight; Black Urron, Andrik Hammerhand, Hagen Pyke, Ragnor Nine-Fingers, Ralf the Dancer, Sigfryd Hardhead . . . “ Rickon was taken aback to see a hint of a tear in the old Ironborn’s eye as he sighed heavily. “All dead and gone save me, either in Dagon’s war or on later voyages. I alone remain of that crew, and if I die in my bed I will not see them again. The Drowned God takes us all to his halls when we die, but my old shipmates will not accept me in their company unless I die in battle, as they did.” Erik turned to stare out at the eastern horizon. “I have sons and grandsons to carry on my name,” he said softly. “I settled my affairs before I sailed, and gave Iron Hall to my heir. I would make a song before the Drowned God takes me.”
Rickon nodded. The Faith had a similar teaching in that only those who died in battle could enter the Heaven of the Warrior. “I’ll pray for your success then,” he said, “and offer you some more news. A report from the Royal Customs Officer in White Harbor claimed that Maege Mormont was also setting sail for Essos with fifteen hundred Northmen. King Stannis has ordered that those ships under construction for the royal fleet be completed and run through their sea trials at best speed, and that the rest of the fleet prepare to sail and fight on three days’ notice. Dragonstone has been ordered to lay in provisions and military stores sufficient to resupply thirty galleys.”

Erik cocked an eyebrow. “Does Stannis mean to take a hand in this war?” he asked.

Rickon shrugged. “I know not,” he answered, “nor would it be likely that I would be informed unless there were some danger to Dorne and the king’s interests here. In any case I have not heard that the royal fleet was yet strong enough to contemplate fighting both Lys and Tyrosh.”

Erik nodded. “No more had I,” he said. “Takes time to build a fleet; time and good sailors.” He turned back to the bustling harbor. “We’ll give King Robert a fleet though,” he said. “And we’ll see how the slavers fight against true sons of the sea.”

“If I may make a suggestion, my lord,” Rickon said slowly, not wanting to give offense, “take care. Animals are most dangerous when they’re frightened; people aren’t much different. After Myr, the slavers have reason to be very frightened.”

Erik smiled a carnivorous smile. “All the better,” he said confidently, stroking the head of the massive hammer thrust into his belt. “Frightened men fight stupidly.”

XXX

Robert turned from Maester Gordon’s explanation of the improvements his Pioneers were making to the battlements of the town of Almus at a slight cough from one of his bodyguards, his initial frown turning into a smile at the sight of a familiar face. “Master Nestoris!” he cried, striding forward and clasping hands with Vito Nestoris. “It’s been too long, man! How is the Bank treating you these days?”

“Well enough, Your Grace, thank you,” Vito replied with a bow over their clasped hands before turning gracefully and gesturing to the man standing next to him. “Allow me to present to Your Grace Giulio Armati, Special Envoy of the Selord and the Council of Thirty.” Giulio, a sparely built man of about thirty with a rectangular face, neat as a black mouse in his hose, close-fitting doublet, and unadorned cloak, swept off his flat black cap, adorned only with a small silver badge depicting the Titan of Braavos, and bowed deeply.

Robert gestured for him to rise impatiently. “Come, Master Giulio, give your hand like a man,” he said. “Friends need not stand on ceremony with each other.” Giulio rose slowly, looking somewhat nonplussed, and eventually shook Robert’s hand tentatively. “Shall we move indoors?” Robert asked, gesturing at the walkway they were standing on. “This is not exactly a council chamber.”

“That will not be necessary, Your Grace,” Vito said calmly. “Six days ago we were riding out from the northern gate of Myr city and we have not left the saddle since except in necessity; it will be good to stand for a time. In any case we have been charged to waste not a moment if it can be helped.

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Robert blinked, six days from Myr city to Almus on its northern border would be hard and fast riding even for him, and looked over the two Braavosi again. Both were unshaven, and their clothes, usually so neatly immaculate, were rumpled and travel-stained. Clearly they had taken their charge of haste seriously. “Very well then,” he said, hooking his thumbs into his sword-belt
“His Excellency the Sealord and the Council of Thirty wish to invite you to a conference in the city of Pentos, to be held in three sennights’ time,” Giulio replied. “It is their intention to find some solution to this present conflict that all parties will find agreeable, in order to restore peace to the Narrow Sea and allow the resumption of regular commerce.”

Robert cocked an eyebrow. “In the first place,” he said skeptically, “I happen to be at war; I can’t just up and bugger off to Pentos at the drop of a hat. Secondly, I’ll be damned if I negotiate with fucking slavers.”

“The Sealord and the Council are aware of these difficulties, Your Grace,” Giulio answered smoothly. “This is why the conference is being held in Pentos under the auspices of third parties. Both the Sealord and the Council have asked me to assure you that you will not be thought the worse of by them if you refuse to accept any agreement that may be produced. They ask only that you attend and listen with open ears.”

“Third parties, plural?” asked Maester Gordon, rolling up his plans. “Who else is hosting the conference?”

“The Sealord approached Your Grace’s brother King Stannis to solicit his assistance in bringing about this conference,” Giulio replied. “He proved amenable, and will be sending his Hand Lord Arryn to serve as his representative.”

Robert pursed his lips meditatively. If he had to pick any man aside from Ned to make sure that everyone at this conference played by the rules, he would pick Jon; his foster-father might be an old stick at times, but he could read a man like a book and play him like an instrument. He would bet anything that Jon was providing most of Stannis’ brains these days. Be fair, man, he chided himself. He would have done the same for you, like as not, if you couldn’t have Ned. Speaking of whom . . . “Why do you want me, specifically, to attend?” he asked. “This sort of thing is why I have a Hand; you’d have met him in Myr.”

“We did, as a matter of fact,” said Giulio, his bland expression suddenly shadowed by a slight frown. “I am instructed to convey to Your Grace the regrets of the Sealord and the Council that they do not consider Lord Stark to be a suitable representative.”

Robert’s jaw dropped. “Bells of the hells, why?” he asked when he finally got over his shock. “I trust Ned more than any man alive.”

“Lord Stark assured the Council and the Sealord’s representative that Your Grace had no intent to assume the government of Myr,” Giulio said, spreading his hands. “And yet here we are.”

“Your Grace,” Vito interjected, “When I followed your company to Pentos I had the opportunity to observe Lord Stark rather closely. I am but a humble functionary of the Bank, but I have some skill at discerning a man’s character and I saw no hint of duplicity in Lord Stark’s nature. That being the case, the Sealord and the Council must assume one of two things, and I pray Your Grace not take offense as I enumerate them.” He held up a slender finger. “One: Lord Stark has sufficient skill at lying to fool more than a dozen of the most discerning men in Braavos, including the First Sword, who among other things was chosen specifically for his skill at perceiving a man’s true nature.” Vito paused as Robert threw his head back and laughed uproariously at the thought of Ned Stark, consummate liar. When Robert finally calmed down enough to motion for him to continue, he raised a second finger. “Two: Lord Stark was not operating with full knowledge of Your Grace’s intentions when he was negotiating with us, demonstrating thereby that he does not, in fact, have the utmost confidence of Your Grace.”
Vito spread his hands. “In either case, Your Grace, the remedy is clear to the Sealord and the Council; the only man they may assume has full knowledge of Your Grace’s designs is Your Grace yourself, which makes you the only man we may negotiate with and be confident that any agreements will be properly adhered to. I must add, Your Grace, that this is also the view of the keyholders of the Iron Bank. After all, it was they as much as First Sword Forel whom Lord Stark so effectively fooled.”

Robert opened his mouth to roar at the man who had just cast aspersions on his honor and that of his best friend, and then closed his mouth as he thought it through. Bloody hells, when it was put that way he could see the Braavosi’s point. He’d have a hard time trusting or believing someone who suckered him with a straight face, whether he had meant to or not. He turned to Ser Dafyn Otley, who as one of the lieutenants of his bodyguard had command of the half-company on duty today. “How quickly can the household be on the road to Pentos?” he asked.

Ser Dafyn glanced at the sun, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Daybreak tomorrow, if we start preparing within the hour,” he said eventually. “Noon, if we take more than essential baggage.”

“Essential baggage only,” Robert said firmly. “I assume the conference will begin within a sennight or two,” he glanced at Giulio and Vito, who nodded confirmation. “Plan to be on the road for eight to eleven days, in Pentos for fourteen days, and then traveling back here immediately after. No wagons, no carts; packhorses only, and every man mounted.” He turned to Giulio and Vito. “I assume the slavers will be there as well?”

Giulio nodded. “Representatives from Lys and Tyrosh will be attending in addition to Your Grace and Lord Arryn,” he replied. “We are reasonably certain that the Lyseni Conclave at least desires a swift return to peace. The Archon,” Giulio made a face, “may need some persuading.”

Robert nodded and turned back to Ser Dafyn. “No man comes who cannot fight,” he said. “I don’t trust these slavers any further than I can kick them.” Neither of the Braavosi reacted, to Robert’s mild disappointment; his comment had come very near to implying that he didn’t trust them to keep the peace at their own conference on their own territory. They deserve it for not trusting Ned. “Masters, I pray you excuse us,” he said to the Braavosi. “I have business to attend to before we ride tomorrow.”

“But Your Grace,” Maester Gordon said suddenly, “who are you leaving in command?”

“Ned will rule in my absence, I’ll sign papers to that effect tonight,” Robert replied. “As for who will command here,” he smiled at Gordon, “you will. Congratulations on your promotion, don’t let the town get sacked. Or if you do, have the good manners to die trying to prevent it and spare me the effort of having you executed.”

His jocular tone, beaming smile, and hearty clap on Gordon’s shoulder didn’t seem to have the intended effect of showing the maester that he was only joking about the execution; Gordon was still standing there, his mouth opening and closing like a landed fish, as Robert and Ser Dafyn walked toward the town to inform the household of the new change in plans. Later that night, after signing the warrant placing power in Ned’s hands while he was in Pentos, Robert leaned back and smiled at the thought of seeing Jon’s face when he walked into the council chamber as a king. Mad harebrained venture eh, Jon, he thought as he poured himself a glass and smiled through the door at Alaesa where she sat invitingly on the bed. I don’t think I’ve done too badly so far.

XXX

Sajo, ko to Khal Zirqo, smiled in anticipation as the khalasar rode into the Myrish lands. It had been too long since they had come this way.
Khal Zirqo was one of the hrakkar of the plains, unquestioned ruler of a khalasar twenty-five thousand strong. Ten of the bells in his braid had been gotten in battle against khalasars almost as strong as his, and when he visited the cities of the walkers they all but fell over themselves to provide him gifts. Even Khal Drogo, whose fame and dread had already spread across the plains before his twenty-fifth year, spoke softly to Khal Zirqo when they met at Vaes Dothrak and gave him gifts of honor. Zirqo might be past forty, but he had last cut his hair at the age of sixteen, and age had only tempered his strength with wisdom.

So when Zirqo had heard of the wars that had taken place among the slaver cities, he had led his khalasar across the Rhoyn to see for himself. As he had explained to Sajo and the other khals, whether the walkers who had held power when last the khalasar had rode this way still held power or not, their war would have weakened them enough that their gifts would be all the greater; the better to earn the khal’s forbearance while they were weak. And if their wars had weakened them enough that their gifts proved insufficient, then they would be weak enough that the khalasar could take their own gifts. Sajo’s smile turned carnivorous at the thought. The gifts that the walkers gave were good enough, in their way, but it was known that they gave only a portion of their treasures, and not the best portion. The thought of being able to choose for himself from the goods of a walker’s house, from his cloth and wine and slaves and women . . . it was almost enough to make Sajo salivate.

And the khal’s predictions had been borne out. Six gold dinars, minted in the vaults of the Iron Bank, stamped with the head of the Titan, and with the hole punched through the center to show that the khal of Braavos’ tax had been paid, could buy Khal Zirqo’s favorite horse, or so Sajo had been told. Fifty such dinars would buy a house in one of the walkers’ cities or a mating-slave from the walkers of Lys.

The new khal of Pentos, who it seemed was in truth a ko of Braavos, had given forty thousand gold dinars to Khal Zirqo alone, along with ten thousand each to Sajo and the other two kos, and the value of another ten thousand in silver and bronze dinars, so that each of the eleven thousand warriors of the khalasar had a string of silver and bronze coins attached to the line of his reins so that they jingled as he rode. In addition to the coin there had also been bolts of richly dyed cloth, casks of stinging wine and rich beer, and a sumptuous feast. It had almost made up for the fact that the khal of Pentos had refused outright to give them any slaves. It was, he had said with great dignity, against the will of the Braavosi’s gods for them to keep or give slaves, and rather than transgress against that commandment they would fight to the death. Khal Zirqo, for his part, had accepted the explanation, enjoyed the proffered feast with good cheer, and on the road southward he had allowed his kos to attack one village each and take their people as slaves.

Sajo sighed reminiscently; it was good to have a khal who was mindful of his followers and generous with those that pleased him. Zirqo had even told them that they could keep all the slaves they had taken without giving him a gift of the best, as was customary. Sajo and his fellow kos, Hazo and Pobo, had given the khal the best of the slaves they had taken anyway; it was bad luck to reward generosity with stinginess, as the khal himself had demonstrated to the Braavosi. Hopefully the Andals who had taken Myr would have better manners than the Braavosi.

On the other hand, they might not be. The khal-of-Pentos-who-was-truly-a-ko-of-Braavos had claimed that the Andals who had taken Myr were fierce warriors, and were also forbidden by their gods from keeping or giving slaves. He had waxed especially eloquent about their steel-covered horsemen who made the ground quake under their charge, and their archers who could darken the sky with their shafts. Their khal, it had been claimed, was a giant of a man taller and broader than any man in the khalasar who fought with a hammer that an ordinary man could barely lift, while the least of his kos was a finer swordsman than any in their homeland across the poison water. Their gods fought at their side, the slaves that had been taken from the Pentoshi villages had
claimed, and every man of them fought like hrakkar as a result.

Sajo spat on the ground by his horse’s right fore-hoof; walkers all lied, it was known. The Andals who came to the plains were weak and cowardly creatures, giving gifts to any who asked them and never raising a hand to defend themselves, even against insults that would have even a Dothraki woman shrieking with fury and reaching for her husband’s arakh. And even if these Andals did fight, there were no fighters in the world who could match the Dothraki. The plains were littered with the ruined cities of those who had tried.

So when Sajo saw a pair of men on horseback burst out of a ravine and gallop away southward, he held his riders back. It would only be polite, he explained to Khal Zirqo that evening when he made his report, to allow the Andals time to gather a sufficient quantity of suitable gifts. The khal laughed loud and long at the jest.
Rolling the Iron Dice

It was a very different army that was marching out of Myr, Eddard reflected, from the army that had taken it. The heart and soul of that army had been Westerosi, although the freedmen had become an important appendage that helped to fill their ranks. The army that marched past him out of the Great Eastern Gate was almost entirely Myrish; except for a few officers in the infantry, fifty archers, and the two hundred knights and heavy horse, every man marching under the paired banners of the Crown and the Iron Legion had either been born or had lived most of their lives east of the Narrow Sea. Partly that was due to the fact that most of the Westerosi-born soldiers in the Royal Army had marched with Robert and Jaime to defend the coastlands, but it was also a fact of numbers. The months between the taking of Myr and the closing of the Sea of Myrth due to this new war had seen a flood of volunteers come across the Narrow Sea, but even so Eddard didn’t believe that there were more than ten or eleven thousand Westerosi of all descriptions in the Kingdom of Myr. If the new kingdom was to not only survive, but thrive, it depended on the men marching past him.

On the face of it, they were certainly promising material, even though only a few of them were veterans of Tara or the taking of Myr; most of those veterans had marched away with Robert. Each man wore at least a padded jack made up of quilted layers of linen and leather, while some men wore brigandines or ring- or scale-mail shirts that had been taken from slaver corpses. Their armor also included an arming cap and a helmet, most often either a halfhelm or a kettle helmet, although a few wore greathelms, barbutes, or bascinets scavenged from dead men-at-arms or knights. For weapons they carried either a kite shield and a seven-foot spear or a crossbow and forty bolts, with a shortsword at each man’s left hip. Their officers, either former sergeants from Westeros or Essosi-born freedmen who had been promoted for ability and initiative, carried a glaive, a bill, or a halberd, both to help straighten the lines of their men and to provide each company with weapons that would be more effective against armored enemies; there was no proper equivalent to the Andal knight in Essos, but Tyroshi and Qohorik armor was famous even in Westeros, and the slaver cities had the wealth to put at least some men in full plate.

As for the men themselves, the faces under the helmet-brims were uniformly resolute behind the beards and moustaches that almost all of them had taken to cultivating; slaves had been forbidden from growing out their facial hair under Myrish law, apparently in order to allow them to be distinguished at a glance from the free-born. Each man wore the spear-and-broken-chain emblem of the Legion stitched onto their jack, often supplemented with either the seven-pointed star of the Faith or the fiery heart of R’hllor. Their marching didn’t quite have the same degree of belligerent confidence of the veterans, but veteran or not, three thousand spearmen and a thousand crossbowmen marching in step made the earth tremble, and Eddard saw nothing in the infantry that hinted of fear.

“I still say this is risky,” Ser Gerion grumbled at his side. “This is most of the remaining garrison you’re marching away with, and the men you’ll be meeting from Sirmium and Campora will be most of the proven men of their garrisons. If the horselords beat you, we will be all but naked unless we yield the coastlands to the slavers.”

“You still have the walls,” Eddard said, gesturing at the gatehouse looming above them. “And I’m leaving you five hundred spears and two thousand crossbows, along with the City Watch and whatever men you can train with the crossbows we’re leaving behind. That was almost enough to beat us, and we’re much better at storming fortifications than the Dothraki are. Even if the slavers
try and attack the city you should be fine.”

“It’s still risky,” Gerion said, brushing a fly away from his horse’s neck irritably. “If anyone aside from Robert can hold this kingdom together it’s you, if only because you’re Robert’s foster-brother. You should trust the Blackfish to fight this battle for you, if the Dothraki decide to fight.”

Eddard shook his head. “We can’t afford to stay out of this,” he answered. “We have to show the freedmen that our lordship over them is justified, that we won’t shirk our share of the fighting just because we’ve become the lords of this land. Why do you think I’m taking every knight that can be spared from the garrison and the Watch?”

Gerion scowled. “You don’t need to lecture me on the duties of a knight,” he said sourly. “I am a knight, after all. I just want to be sure that you’re not leading this army out just because you want to make your name as a great captain.”

“I already have a name, after Tara and the siege,” Eddard said, “I don’t need another. What I do need, what this kingdom needs, is to show our people that we can and will fight to the death against every slaver on this continent.” He shrugged. “We can shout ‘Death to the slavers’ from the rooftops all we want, but we have to show that we mean it. If we slacken even once, if we give the slavers even one inch of ground or one day of peace, then we tell our people that we aren’t serious about the fight for freedom.” Eddard looked back at the river of men marching out of the gates. “The Dothraki call the tribute they levy ‘gifts’, Akhollo tells me,” he said softly. “The only gifts this kingdom can give to slavers are the gifts of fire and sword. If ever we give anything else, that is the day we start to die.”

Gerion chewed on the ends of his moustache for a moment as he thought over Eddard’s words, then shrugged. “Well and so,” he said grumpily. “But I still say it’s risky.”

“Is there any part of this empris that is not risky?” Eddard asked, gesturing at the city walls. “If we have come this far it is because we have rolled the iron dice without thought of cost. The only thing to do is keep rolling.”

XXX

Ser Leofric gestured for Septon Jaspar to sit and poured him a glass of wine. “My son thinks you are hearing my confession,” he said, pushing the glass across the table, “and the tale of my sins is not so great that telling of them would take very long. What do you want?”

Jaspar leaned forward. “I have sufficient evidence to convict Septon Jonothor of heresy,” he said, his voice unfortunately brittle-sounding even when he was speaking softly. “Twenty minutes of questioning in front of the Most Devout and I can have him condemned to the fire.”

Leofric sat back in his light campaign chair. “Quite the claim,” he said finally. “Defend it, if you please.”

“The heart of it is that Jonothor is defying the teachings of the Faith,” Jaspar said, his brittle voice turning pedantic. “The Council of Stony Sept in 452 BC declared that salvation is contingent upon belief in the Seven and the performance of good works in accordance with their laws. This is why those who follow the Old Gods are barred from the Heavens and must suffer in Purgatory until the last day, regardless of their merits in this life.” Leofric nodded; as the eldest son he had been destined to inherit Heart’s Home instead of becoming a septon, but everyone learned the basic doctrines of the Faith. “Jonothor’s commendation of Faithless dead to the care of the Seven, however, relies on the idea that belief in the Seven is not necessary; that salvation can be attained through good works alone. In this case, dying in the wars of this kingdom.” Jaspar spread his
hands. “It is unquestionably heretical,” he said triumphantly. “No man can enter the Heavens unless he believes in the Seven and keeps their commandments. In advocating otherwise, Jonothor is directly contravening the doctrines of the Faith. I would be perfectly justified in ordering you to strike off his head at the next opportunity.”

Leofric cocked an eyebrow. “In the first place,” he began slowly, marshalling his thoughts as he went, “suicide is a mortal sin, and attacking Jonothor would count as suicide; I’ve seen how the freedmen infantry who follow the Seven regard him, much less the knights. In the second place, to kill a man without a trial and a sentence of death is murder, also a deadly sin. In the third place, the only place where Jonothor can be fairly tried is in King’s Landing.” He gestured at the walls of the tent to indicate the encampment beyond. “There happens to be a war on, if you hadn’t noticed; even if we could get Jonothor back to Myr city, onto a ship, and across the Narrow Sea, we would be rightly condemned as deserters and oath-breakers.”

“When Jaehaerys the Conciliator placed the Faith under his protection, he swore an oath that the crown would defend the Faith against heresy as well as its other enemies,” Jaspar replied, glowering. “I invoke that oath, ser knight, and the oath you swore when you received the accolade to protect the Faith. Do your duty.”

Leofric slapped his hand down on the table. “Do not lecture me on my duty, septon,” he growled. “I was defending the Faith when you were still a bulge in your father’s trousers.” That was quite literally true on both counts; Jaspar had to be half Leofric’s age, if that. And the hill tribes of the Mountains of the Moon hated septons even more than knights; knights didn’t forcibly convert captured children or burn their sacred groves with their shamans tied to the heart tree, they just killed them. What the tribesmen did to a sept they had overrun, or to a septon or a begging brother caught on the road, was enough to give even hardened soldiers nausea. “If there is evidence that Jonothor is a heretic,” he continued, gritting his teeth, “then I will take such action as I deem fit. And hear me,” he aimed a finger at Jaspar, “when Jaehaerys swore to protect the Faith, the Faith swore to respect the king’s right to try and execute criminals. I do not care who your uncle may or may not be; in matters of the sword, I hold authority and you have no more right to command than the lowliest page in this army.” He hadn’t seen any family resemblance between Jaspar and the High Septon, but likenesses didn’t always run in families; Leofric, for one, looked nothing like the one half-brother he knew of. And for a man as young as Jaspar to be given a duty this important at such a young age generally took either great ability or great influence. Jaspar certainly had ability, even if his style of preaching tended to grate and he was a little harsh with the penances he handed out, but he was still a tad young to be sent to sniff out a potential heretic. Unless someone in charge of making such decisions thought he had what it took.

As Jaspar stalked out of the tent, Leofric glared at the bottle of wine, eventually deciding against another glass. These days drinking to excess made him sluggish and crabby the next morning and deliberately incapacitating yourself while on campaign was a stupid idea. Besides, he reflected grumpily as he stowed the bottle in its case, it was his own damned fault for swearing contradictory oaths. At his age he really should have known better.

That self-knowledge didn’t keep him from staying up half the night praying to the Crone for the wisdom to see a way out of the mess he had landed himself in. Come morning he was no closer to a solution than he had been the evening before and he was as snappish as if he had drained the bottle. I might as well have gotten drunk, he thought to himself grudgingly as he swung himself onto his horse.

XXX

Marq Grafton sat down in his chair, automatically compensating for the gentle roll of his ship
Gulltown’s Pride as he did so, while his manservant set out a pair of goblets and a decanter of wine, the last of the Arbor red, and placed a cushion on the chair across the table from him. A successful escape deserved an appropriate celebration.

Marq prided himself on being a practical man with a keen mind and a gift for logic. It was why he had been one of the richest lords in the Vale, second only to Jon Arryn and that only because the old man had taken an unreasonable share of the customs duties on cargos that landed on the Gulltown docks. Ancient privilege or not, there had been no reason for it; Jon, ever the proper lord and the perfect gentle knight, had refused to dirty his hands with the intimate details of trade. Marq’s fingers tightened on the arm of his chair as he remembered how the old man had looked down that overlarge nose at him, as if the interest he took in commerce made him some sort of lesser being. The Graftons were at least as old a house as the Arryns, if not older, and featured just as prominently in the old legends about the conquest of the Vale. A Grafton had fought at Artys Arryn’s side at the Battle of the Seven Stars, and Grafton knights had harried the mountain tribesmen as fiercely as those of any other Vale house. And yet he had never been given his proper due of respect, simply because he took the interest in trade necessary to make his house thrive beyond what their lands alone could support, so that he could leave his sons a greater patrimony than he had received from his father.

So when Rhaegar had promised not just a remission of royal taxes on imports into Gulltown but positions of honor for Marq and his sons, he had taken his fleet and joined the Minstrel Prince’s court of exiles. And while his enthusiasm for the dragon’s cause had waned after Tara, the flight to Volantis, and Rhaegar’s death, he had remained faithful; there was still Viserys, after all, and the child Queen Praela had been carrying might have been a son. But the Queen had birthed a daughter, and the day after the Triarchs of Volantis had informed them that they would not support or endorse Viserys’ claim to the Iron Throne, although they would allow the exiles to remain in the city in token of the past courtesies that House Targaryen had paid to Volantis the mighty.

Marq had begun plotting the same night. It was plain for anyone with the eyes to see and the wits to calculate that without significant support from Volantis, the best that the Targaryens could hope for was to become sellswords, and Marq didn’t want that life for his sons and grandsons. Nor had he been alone. Both his own sailors and the men of the royal fleet had not signed up for a life of permanent exile; they had all believed, had all been promised, that a year or two would see the Baratheons thrown down and the dragon restored to its rightful throne, with rewards for every man who kept faith. But that year had run its course, Rhaegar was dead and gone to ashes, and the only remaining dragons were a ten year-old boy and an infant girl, with the cause of the Targaryens in the hands of their two remaining Kingsguards and a glorified cloth-monger. Clearly it was time to get out of it while they still had a chance; Rahtheon’s pockets might be deep, but they couldn’t maintain a fleet of one hundred and eighty ships and pay their sailors indefinitely.

Marq had had the means and the motive, and the opportunity had arisen when a little man had come to him and explained that the Triarchs would consider it a favor if he removed the main force of the Targaryens from their control; Volantis, it seemed, had less-than-fond memories of the dragonlords of old Valyria, despite their protestations of amity to the current heirs of those dragonlords. A plan had quickly taken shape around that scaffolding. All that had been missing was the sweetener.

A knock on the door of the cabin, and his manservant’s announcement of “Her Grace the Queen,” brought Marq to his feet with a practiced smile on his face. It was even mostly genuine; Praela not only had all the accomplishments a young woman of her class should have, she was very easy on the eyes. A bit too dark for Marq’s tastes, with her skin a shade or two darker than olive, but pretty enough with her heart-shaped face and black eyes. She didn’t quite match Marq’s memories of Elia Martell, for one thing she wasn’t as slender as the Dornish princess had been, but he could
certainly see how she had caught Rhaegar’s eye.

Nor was she alone; a tall man with the ebony skin of a Summer Islander was carrying a locked chest in his massive arms. It took much of Marq’s self-control to not start drooling at the sight of it. Instead he bowed over Praela’s hand, with the same ceremony and propriety as if they were at court, gestured her to her seat, which his manservant pulled out for her with millimetric correctness, and poured wine for them both, raising his goblet in a toast. “To our success, Your Grace, and the blessing of the Gods on our venture,” he said, letting a twinkle enter his eye.

“To a most excellently managed escape, my lord,” Praela purred. “I know little enough of such enterprises, but I am led to understand that preparing a fleet to sail in complete secrecy and effecting an escape from a guarded harbor is quite difficult.”

“Courage, good judgment, and divine favor make all things possible, Your Grace,” Marq said, placing his goblet on the table and not mentioning the fact that the Triarchs had given orders that their escape not be contested. “And for a lady so fair as yourself, I would undertake ventures more difficult still.” Especially if he could have someone like Praela herself assisting; how she had managed to lull not only Ser Arthur and Ser Barristan but her own father into a false sense of security was beyond Marq’s comprehension. He had managed it by dint of avoiding them when he could and speaking as little as possible when circumstance forced him into their company. Without Praela holding their attention, one of them would have gotten suspicious.

Praela set her own goblet on the table. “My lord, you must call me by my name,” she said, beaming at him. “We are to be partners, after all; partners have no need of formality between them.”

Marq inclined his head slightly. “As you wish, my . . . Praela,” he said, making her giggle. Gods, I had almost forgotten how much fun seduction was, he thought to himself as they exchanged further coquetries. His wife had died in childbirth years ago, and he had never felt the need to remarry afterwards, or even engage in the harmless philandering common to lords across Westeros. His work had consumed him in the years after his wife died. At last, after a conversation that had begun with flirtation and ended with a serious discussion of what they needed in order to set up as a pirate fleet in the Stepstones, he cleared his throat awkwardly. “I, ah, hope you don’t mind,” he said stiffly, “but as to the promises we made to each other . . .”

“Of course, of course,” Praela answered smoothly, fluttering her hands. “Business is business.” A click of her fingers brought her slave forward from where he had been standing with the chest to set it on the table at Praela’s left hand. Reaching down the front of her dress with a wink at Marq that almost made him shake his head in disappointment at the obviousness of the stratagem, she produced a heavy iron key. “Unfortunately I was only able to acquire half of them,” she said, fitting the key to the heavy padlock holding the chest closed and turning it with a small grunt of effort, “but there were too many for one man to carry and I had no one else I could trust but old Jabas, here, who has been with me since I was a girl.” The Summer Islander bowed mutely as Praela drew back the lid of the chest. “The treasure of House Targaryen, my . . . Marq,” she said grandly, gesturing at the quintet of dragon eggs that rested within the chest on a velvet cushion. “Take your choice.”

Marq’s smile became entirely genuine. “Erac,” he said calmly.

Without hesitation, his manservant produced a poniard from his sleeve and drove it into Jabas’ back twice. The blow to the kidney would have been fatal within moments, but the second blow transfixed the Summer Islander’s heart and the scream that Jabas had been opening his mouth to utter turned into a gurgling sigh as he collapsed. Erac, a fastidious and endlessly useful man, took
the time to wipe his blade clean on Jabas’ loose trousers before knocking on the door in a syncopated rhythm that instantly produced sounds of violence outside.

Praela was aghast. “Are you mad?!” she cried finally, after almost a full minute spent looking from her dead slave to Marq to Erac and back.

“You know, I wasn’t sure whether or not you actually believed, me,” Marq said, leaning back in his chair as a pair of his men-at-arms came through the door cleaning the last of the blood off their swords. “After all, why would a sane and rational man like myself turn pirate, with all the dangers and discomforts that entails, when in one stroke I can win a king’s regard, regain my lands and titles, and become one of the richest men in Westeros. If it makes you feel better, something like this would have happened even if I’d actually been planning to turn pirate; a woman cold enough to abandon her newborn daughter for her own advantage is a woman too cold to share my bed. I’m an old man, and I’d like to grow older still.” At Praela’s sudden, fearful glance back towards the men-at-arms, Marq shook his head. “Fear not, Your Grace, no harm will come to you; you’re to be an ornament of King Stannis’ court, after all, it wouldn’t do for you to be damaged in the meantime. I admit that I know little enough of Stannis’ character, but no man likes to unwrap a gift only to find it broken.”

Praela, her face contorting with sudden fury, was only foiled in her attempt to snatch up her goblet and throw it at him by the two men-at-arms, who caught her by the arms. “Faithless bastard!” she shrieked, her formerly laughing black eyes flashing hate. “We had a deal!”

“I am altering the deal, Your Grace,” Marq said calmly. “If you wish to spend the rest of the voyage in comfort, then I suggest you pray that I do not alter it further.” He turned his attention to the two men-at-arms. “Put her in the fo’c’sle cabin and place a guard on the door. Any man who touches her loses whatever he touched her with. Make it known.”

As the men-at-arms grunted acknowledgement and towed the screeching former queen out of the cabin, Marq refilled his goblet and raised it in a toast to his new dragon eggs. *I do love it when a plan comes together,* he mused as he drank deep.
A Flash, a Smuggler, and Twa Corbies

The following is an excerpt from Flash and the Round Table, the second instalment in the Flash Papers by George Dand.

It’s a hell of a thing, a heroic reputation. On the one hand the whoremasters don’t gouge you as much, the innkeepers tend to give you discounts in return for getting a glowing testimonial from a genuine hero, and it’s hellishly flattering to have minstrels and jongleurs making songs about your exploits (magnifying the facts out of all recognition as they go, but that’s part of their trade so there you are). On the other hand, once you have a reputation you have to maintain the blasted thing, especially if you’re not the sort of person who’s expected to have one. It’s all right for the Jaime Lannisters and the Ned Starks and the Robert Baratheons of the world to win laurels as the great men of their day; comes with the name, see? But when you’re the son of a newly-landed knight whose only talents are horsemanship and languages (and fornication, but only among ladies of negotiable virtue), you need to prove that you deserve to be named in the same breath as men like the Black Lion and the Iron Wolf.

So when the raven came from King’s Landing requesting me to present myself at Court for consultations, there was nothing for it but to spend the rest of the day packing and set out the next morning. For one thing, my family was among Stannis’ New Nobles and held the manor by dint of knight-service at His Grace’s pleasure; failure to show up would get at least me and possibly the whole family kicked onto the road. For another, it wouldn’t do for Ser Harry Flash, one of the heroes of the Greenblood, to be anything but enthusiastic for His Grace’s service. Tally ho and once more unto the breach, that was the ticket, and never a hint that I’d much rather be home galloping Maryam out of her wits at every opportunity and drinking myself into an early grave instead of jumping into the political mess of the decade.

It was like this, see. His Grace’s mad brother Robert, who had gone and conquered one of the Free Cities by dint of sheer balls and hard fighting, had gotten himself in a spot of bother in that he had found himself at war with the two other Free Cities in the area, both of whom hated his guts. As well they should have, seeing as he was bent on killing them all and freeing their slaves. Mind, I’ve no truck with slavery myself, but I can see how that sort of attitude would offend. The problem was that Robert was too strong for them to beat on land, so they had taken to fighting him from the sea, where he wasn’t strong enough to even try to fight them, much less beat them; not that it stopped his pet Ironborn from trying, but that’s Ironborn for you, optimistic lunatics to a man. That said, they could scourge the Sea of Myrth all they wanted, but they couldn’t take the Myrish coastland in the face of the Iron Legion, so the war turned into a stalemate.

That got the attention of the Braavosi. They’re the most cold-blooded people in the world, the Braavosi, except about two things; slavery and trade. They didn’t like the slaver cities any more than Robert did, but at the same time they needed a war with them like they needed a hole in the head; a third of Braavos’ exchequer came from trade with the slaver cities, for all their unflattering comments about fleshmongers. So the Braavosi set up a conference at Pentos and invited Robert and the slavers to come and talk out their differences, with us helping the Braavosi keep the peace. Since the invitation to the conference was official, that meant that the only person who would do as His Grace’s representative was His Hand, Lord Arryn, and he would need a full retinue, to which I found myself attached, officially anyway, as interpreter, gentleman-at-arms, and general functionary. Unofficially, or so I was told, I was to be a combination bodyguard and errand boy. See, the slaver cities didn’t like us much more than they did Robert’s new kingdom; Robert was
our king’s brother after all, and his army was still Westerosi when it wasn’t freedman. So if some lunatic on the slaver’s side lost his temper and tried to knife Lord Arryn at the conference table, it would be a good thing for His Nibs to have someone at his side who was a good man of his hands and whose presence couldn’t be objected to. Similarly, if His Nibs needed someone to run any dangerous errands, it would be good if he had someone who knew the lingo well enough to talk his way out of any complications he couldn’t fight his way out of.

Of course all this talk about bodyguarding the Hand of the King and running clandestine errands for him, and the accompanying mental images of fighting off a swarm of Essosi daggermen or riding for my life with slaver freeriders in pursuit, put my heart right down in my boots, but there was nothing for it except to say ‘As my lord commands,’ and fall into ranks. For one thing trying to beg off would have looked damn fishy. For another, it was still a comfortable billet; Lord Arryn was a pretty dry old stick, but he was also known to feed his men well and it was supposed to be a peace conference after all. The Exchequer’s report was that none of the parties involved had enough lucre to pay for more than another month or two of war, and so they should be happy enough to find a way out of it all. So despite my misgivings, I reported aboard ship with the rest of the retinue, stood at attention while His Grace and His Nibs gassed away at each other through the departure ceremonies, and suffered through the voyage to Pentos with the rest of the embassy. Gods, if only I had known what I was getting myself into . . .

XXX

Erik Ironmaker smiled as he reviewed the chart of the Stepstones that lived in his head. Bloodstone was the largest of the Stepstones save for the isle of Tyrosh, and his fleet had stormed and burned the tower that the Tyroshi kept on the island with less than a hundred casualties. It was the latest in a string of victories that taken separately were only minor ones, but as a whole could only constitute a serious defeat to the naval policy of the slavers. It appeared that none of the slavers had thought to watch for a fleet coming from the south and southwest; understandably so, as Dorne had no navy worth the name, and all of the slavers’ potential enemies that did have fleets were either north or northwest of them. So the Ironborn had swept the breadth of the Stepstones from south to north, taking, sinking, or burning every ship and stronghold flying slaver colors they encountered. Twenty galleys had gone to the bottom and five towers like the one here on Bloodstone had gone up in smoke in order to put Erik and his fleet on the northern edge of the Stepstones with a choice before them.

From Bloodstone there were three ways to reach the Sea of Myrth. The safest way would be to sail due north until the easternmost tip of Cape Wrath was sighted, and then turn due east; the problem was that the prevailing winds out of the Sea of Myrth drove westward towards Cape Wrath and Shipbreaker Bay. And while the fleet could resort to their oars, it would be slow and exhausting going, and there would be at least one battle to fight on the other end of the voyage. The two other ways went right by Tyrosh isle itself, one between Tyrosh and its companion isle of Coralstone, the other between Tyrosh and the mainland. Taking either of those routes would allow the fleet to slip under the westerlies and use the northern edge of the eastward winds that rolled out of Dorne to speed their passage.

The problem, of course, was that it would also take them right under the noses of the Tyroshi, who were bound to have kept at least one squadron of galleys to defend their home island. Ordinarily, Erik wouldn’t have cared, but the blow they were planning would not strike half as heavily without a generous helping of surprise. And if the slaver galleys got past the longships and into the knarrs . . . there were almost two hundred women in those ships, along with about a dozen children.

Fortunately, there were sources Erik could consult.
Smuggling was an inescapable fact of life in the Stepstones, so much so that the Three Daughters had long since given up trying to extirpate it. The tower that Erik’s fleet had burned down had overlooked the main harbor on Bloodstone not just to deny it to enemy shipping, but also to keep an eye on the smugglers who frequented the village that had sprung up to service passing ships. The ‘arrangement’, as it had been known, had been that the Tyroshi, or whoever owned the tower during that phase of the on-and-off wars between the Quarrelsome Daughters, did not interfere too much in smuggling unless they got wind of some especially egregious violation, such as smuggling bullion or arms. In return, the smugglers conducted their business in an orderly fashion and didn’t complain too much when a shortfall in the treasury of the towers’ owners led to a shakedown. Like many things about Essos, it had originated through official boredom, private enterprise, and the never-ending cycle of commerce that dominated the Essosi littoral as thoroughly as the rhythm of the seasons dominated Westeros, and had carried on ever since.

The village had been spared for the most part, although the fleet’s bachelors had gone through its quartet of whorehouses like a hurricane; Erik was too old to know most of the smugglers currently in port himself, but his captains knew them well enough, and it was recognized by all concerned that clashes of kings had no bearing on business. Just because there was a war on didn’t mean that reasonable men couldn’t dicker over a goblet of mead or wine and see if they could make a profit off each other. Half of Erik’s captains were even now selling loot taken from Tyroshi and Lyseni ships to smugglers from almost every quarter of the known world in return for either hard coin or provisions to top off their ships’ stores.

And in addition to coin and provisions, the smugglers also had information; as often as not their necks depended on having at least a general idea of who was where, with how many ships and men, under what colors and in what guise. A smuggler who didn’t pay attention to his surroundings was a smuggler who didn’t live very long, in the usual run of things. So Erik had sent some of his officers out with orders to find him the captain who had most recently passed by Tyrosh and tell him (or her, although female captains were as rare as hen’s teeth) that Erik Ironmaker would pay handsomely for news of Tyrosh and the waters around it.

A knock on the door of the cabin he staying in onshore announced the arrival of one of those captains, who opened the door to announce “News for you, lord,” and usher in a man so slight and ordinary-looking that if Erik had passed him on the street, he wouldn’t have even noticed him. Erik stood, extending his hand as the stranger walked towards him with the rolling gait of a seaman.

“Erik Ironmaker,” he introduced himself, “admiral of the Ironborn here. I take it you have news of Tyrosh?”

“I do, my lord,” the man said in a voice that could only have come from Flea Bottom “Name’s Davos. What do you want to know?”

XXX

Lyn Corbray was not a man of faith.

He paid the Faith the lip-service it was due, but the simple truth of the matter was that he cared not what awaited him when he died. As he understood it, the gods determined where you went and what happened to you in advance, so spending time and effort praying about it struck him as mildly foolish. Whether he lived or died would be determined, he believed, by his own prowess, that of his enemies and allies, and the whim of chance.

So while he attended Divine Office in order to meet the expectations of his men (and his father, although he would never admit it), instead of praying further he took a bottle of wine to the edge of the encampment and sipped from it meditatively as he surveyed the dim glow of the Dothraki
camp on the far side of the wide, flat valley through which ran a small stream whose name, somewhat unoriginally, translated into Common as Narrow Run. About halfway between Ceralia and Myr city, the valley had originally been home to a trio of cotton plantations that had been burned out in the Company’s march on Myr, and Lyn had heard somewhere that the plan was to turn each plantation into a collection of smaller farms centered on a village where the plantation’s manse had been.

He snorted. *That* would have to wait for a time.

A rustle behind him brought around with a hand on the baselard sheathed at his waist; the slavers would love little better than to have someone put a knife in his back. Fortunately it was only his father.

“Son,” the old man said softly, extending a hand. “Will you allow me to join you?”

“Of course,” Lyn replied, taking his father’s hand and offering him the bottle, which he accepted with a nod of thanks. After a long moment of silence as they passed the bottle back and forth, Lyn cleared his throat. “A quiet night so far,” he observed, gesturing across the valley. “Seems our guests don’t want to try their luck in the dark.”

“Few would, even on ground as clear as this,” his father said. “Quite a few of them, aren’t there?”

“Scouts reported about twenty, twenty-five thousand,” Lyn answered. “Call it ten, eleven thousand men of fighting age?”

“Like enough,” his father replied. Savages like the Dothraki had one advantage over civilized folk in that they could put a larger proportion of their folk in the battle-line, especially if, like the Dothraki, they were a warlike and predatory tribe. Among the Dothraki, Lyn had heard, every able-bodied man between fourteen and seventy was a warrior; if you tried that in Westeros the starvation that would result as the crops failed would cause devastation. Typically the most you could get away with without crippling your farms was one man in ten between the ages of seventeen and fifty, and most of those would be indifferent soldiers unless they had been part of some town’s militia or held a farm by sergeancy. “Do you think there will be a battle?”

Lyn shrugged as he took the bottle back. “If it was the Blackfish who was going to parlay with them, then I would doubt it,” he said. “The man’s too canny to provoke a fight on ground that favors the enemy as much as this does.” A gesture with his free hand indicated the clear, gently rolling ground of the valley; almost perfect for cavalry. “But since Stark’s going to be the one parlaying . . . “ He made a face that was only partially concealed by the fading light. “Stark hates slavers almost as much as he hates Targaryens,” he said. “And we’re here partly on the strength of his hatred for Targaryens. I wouldn’t put it past him to tell the khal, or whoever the khal sends, to go fuck his horse tomorrow, and damn the consequences.”

His father nodded, letting a silence fall between them. After a few moments of companionable silence he turned to Lyn. “My son, there are two things I must tell you before tomorrow,” he said. “Things concerning the future of our House.”

Lyn narrowed his eyes. “What manner of things?” he asked cautiously.

“Firstly that if I fall tomorrow, *you* must take up Lady Forlorn,” his father said. “The sword of our House should go to the knight most worthy of her and I can think of none more so than you. Lucas is a boy still and while Lyonel is a good man, he is not one to uphold the words of our House.”

“*Feed the Birds,*” Lyn whispered as the import of his father’s words sank into him.
“Nor have either them served our House’s reputation and the Faith as well as you have done thus far,” his father went on. “Which brings me to the second thing I must tell you. But first a question; what think you of Septon Jonothor?”

Lyn shrugged. “I admit that I care little for his theology,” he said. “But he seems a good man withal. And a man, with it, which is more than can be said for most septons.” The memory of the angular, stern face set in a scowl worthy of the Father as the septon in question preached ran through Lyn’s mind. “He challenges the men to be worthy,” he went on. “And instead of hating him, they love him for it. There are men who would kill and die for him, knights as well as footmen. Jaime Lannister likes him, Ned Stark respects him, and King Robert loves him. Even Greyjoy treats him with courtesy; probably reminds him of one of his god’s priests, if what I hear of the drowned priests is true.”

His father nodded. “Well and so,” he said heavily. “The septon who sailed here with me, Jaspar, would have me keep silent about this matter. But I swore, when I arrived, to give my true faith and allegiance to King Robert, and I have a duty to our House besides. Both on this side of the Sea and the other.” Glancing over his shoulder, he leaned forward, his lined face intent. “Septon Jaspar was sent here, not to preach of the Seven, but to investigate Jonothor for heresy,” he said in a low voice. “And he claims to have found sufficient evidence to convict him of it. The first ship that can make the voyage to King’s Landing will bear his report to the High Septon and the Most Devout, and I doubt not but that their response will be to petition King Robert to arrest Jonothor and transport him to King’s Landing for trial.”

Lyn shook his head. “Ask Robert to give up wine and women and you would be more likely to succeed,” he said. “He has more love for Jonothor than for the High Septon and all the Most Devout put together. He remembers who spurred the freedmen over the walls of Myr, and who put the crown on his head.”

“Like as not,” his father went on. “So, if Robert refuses, they will petition Stannis, who has no such debt to Jonothor and so will be more mindful of his duties as king. I doubt that he will press the issue to the point of war, but it will still come between them, and from small matters great ones arise, in the fullness of time.”

Lyn winced as he contemplated the thought of having to fight a war with the slaver cities without the benevolent neutrality that had hitherto been the policy of the Seven Kingdoms. “I will have to inform Stark of this,” he said. “And Robert too, when he returns from Pentos.”

“I know,” his father replied. “I have already written letters to your brothers, and another to Lord Arryn, advising them of this matter.” He gripped Lyn’s forearm. “You are a man grown, my son, with a place and a name in this kingdom. But if ever you heeded your father’s advice, heed it now; think carefully before involving yourself in this matter of the Faith. I know not whether Jonothor is truly a heretic or not, but if he defies the Most Devout, then the Faith will schism, especially here. The Westerosi here acknowledge the authority of the Great Sept of Baelor, and of the Most Devout and the High Septon, but what of the Essosi who have converted? Will they cleave to authority an ocean away who they have never met, opposed to the man who converted them and brought the light of the Seven to their lives?”

Lyn shook his head. “No,” he said shortly. “It wasn’t the Most Devout who broke their chains.” He shook himself and looked his father in the eye. “Whether it comes to a schism or not,” he said slowly, “I will still have a frontier to hold. As far away from King’s Landing and Myr city as I am, I should be able to stay out of it. But if it finds me,” he shrugged. “I am sworn to Robert,” he went on. “My sword and my service are his to command. Whatever the hazards.”
His father clapped him on the shoulder, pride in his eyes. “I thought as much,” he said, smiling. “You are my son.”
The Game of Words and Daggers

Author's note: This chapter takes place over the space of about two sennights or so, more or less concurrently to the mobilization of the Royal Army of Myr and its march to Narrow Run. Sections in first-person POVs are further excerpts from Flash and the Round Table.

Jon Arryn sat back in his chair, his posture unconsciously erect, and surveyed the other participants of the conference over his steepled fingers. Robert sat three seats away from him on his left, insulated from the other participants by Ser Dafyn Otley, who Jon gathered was one of the chief officers of his household, and Maege Mormont, who had landed two days ago with fifteen hundred Northmen, two-thirds of whom were even now marching south along the coastal road under the command of Cregan Karstark. Across the circular table from him, glaring like a mad tiger, was Garros Sanatis, who claimed to represent the Myrish exiles; Jon had heard that the man had been a merchant-venturer who had been taking on water in Lys when news came of Myr’s capture by the Sunset Company. According to Ser Harry Flash, who claimed to have come across the information while drinking with some of the Lyseni delegation, Garros’ wife, three daughters, sister, goodbrother, two nephews, and niece had not been heard from since the siege and were presumed dead. On Garros’ right was the Tyroshi delegate, Donesso Hestaar, who was stroking his chest-length purple-dyed beard as he glanced around the table under hooded eyelids; evidently he stood high in the Archon’s councils. On Garros’ left there sat the Lyseni ambassador, a tall man with ringleted hair named Brachio Fylliros who even Jon could not describe as anything but beautiful and who sat in his chair with an indolent grace that stopped just short of boorishness. For all his apparent insouciance, however, Brachio’s eyes were still keen as they gazed on Robert; Jon knew little of him beyond that he was deeply involved in the slave and wine trades, but one did not rise high in the Free Cities without at least some ability.

On Jon’s right, Tregano Baholis, the host of the conference, stood and cleared his throat, holding a small sheet of parchment before him. “Your Grace,” he began in the smooth tones of a professional orator, “My Lord, Your Honors, gentlemen, in the name of His Excellency the Sealord and the Council of Thirty, I bid you welcome to this conference. Our purpose here is the restoration of peace through the world, in order that the nations represented here may enjoy the blessings of security, amity, and commerce beloved of men and of the gods, and to allow for justice to be done for any unlawful misdeeds we find to have been done . . . “

“As to that,” spat Garros suddenly, leaning forward, “I would like to know where my wife and daughters are. How about it, Baratheon?”

“How should I know?” Robert asked with a theatrical shrug. “Do I look like a whoremaster to you?”

Jon sighed as Garros shot to his feet, spewing fury and ignoring Donesso’s grab at his arm while Tregano hammered his fist on the table and shouted for order. This, he thought wearily, is going to take a lot of work.

XXX

I once got into a terrible argument with this one septon (the conversation had been about hunting, of all bloody things) about whether fate or chance played a greater role in human affairs. Of course to religious types everything has to be the will of the gods; if it wasn’t they wouldn’t be able to
explain things. I, on the other hand, having been embroiled in something like two-thirds of the
dwars, diplomatic crises, and general alarums of the past half-century or so (through no fault or
desire of my own, let the record show), know just how much of a role that blind luck can play,
especially in affairs that can impact the course of history. To name only one example, if I hadn’t
happened to be the only person in the Westerosi embassy who could convincingly pass himself off
as a Essosi sellsword, and if I had preferred Westerosi beer to Essosi wine, I wouldn’t have been in
the Purple Octopus on the night after the first day of the conference and I wouldn’t have heard the
words “kill the Andal” from the table behind me.

Fortunately I managed to pass off my spraying half of my goblet across the table as a spasm caused
by the wine going down the wrong tube, mostly by coughing a lot and gesturing in vague
reassurance at the serving-wench who started across the floor to see if I needed to be helped out the
door so I didn’t die on the premises. Once I had regained control of myself and, more importantly,
determined the Andal in question wasn’t me, I bent my ear as hard as I could to see if I could find
out which Andal they were talking about. After all, that sort of thing was why I was down in the
Purple Octopus drinking inferior wine and trying not to shudder at the collection of trulls on offer
instead of sitting in front of a decent fire in the wing of the Viceregal Palace that had been given
over to our embassy, sipping a decent red and seducing one of the maids. Alas, the Purple Octopus
was not the quietest of establishments and I could only pick fragments out of the general babble,
although those fragments were chilling enough. I mean, you try listening to someone mutter words
like “death”, “revenge”, and “blood for blood”, even in a sultry Myrish accent, and see how it
makes you feel.

Now if I was a cutthroat out of a romance, as daring as a knight and as cunning as a fox, I’d have
waited until whoever it was who was speaking behind me left, followed them until they split up
each to their own lairs, and knocked one of them over the head so that I could drag them back to
the Palace to see how well he could hold his tongue with a torch held under his feet. Unfortunately,
the villains weren’t so obliging; they did split up, but into two groups of three and no one in the
group I followed split off to take a piss or to taste any more of Myr’s delights. That said, they were
at least kind enough to end up someplace recognizable. The house they went in at had the Tyroshi
banner hanging from a cross-pole over the door.

I told Lord Arryn about it of course, but he didn’t think it too important. “Of course they want to
kill Andals,” was his verdict. “If they didn’t want to kill Andals we wouldn’t be here. Unless you
can find out which Andal specifically they want to kill, and when and where and how they want to
kill him, I’m afraid I can do nothing. Now will you please go and find those things out and cease
wasting my time meanwhile?” Damned ingratitude, you ask me, but what can you do? That’s high
lordships for you.

XXX

Jon Arryn put down his glass, concealing irritation with the ease of long practice. “I beg your
pardon?” he asked, deliberately keeping his tone light. “What do you mean you cannot recognize
the Kingdom of Myr as a sovereign nation?”

Donesso shrugged. “I mean exactly that,” he replied evenly. “The simple fact is that they are not a
nation, but a robber band that has managed to take over a city by dint of treachery. The true nation
of Myr is that which is represented by our well-beloved friend Garros Sanatis and his lieutenants.”

“Who do not hold any Myrish territory beyond a few rocks in the Stepstones and don’t have the
ability to take it back,” Jon retorted. “If anyone is the robber band in this equation it is they. Or do
you deny that they have conducted what amount to pirate raids on the lands of my king?”
Donesso gestured with his free hand as if to brush away an insect. “An attack of rashness on their part which we shall pledge to restrain in future,” he said smoothly. “But Robert and his followers have no legitimate claim to the possession of Myr.”

Ser Harry Flash, who had been pouring himself a drink at the sideboard, raised his eyebrows. “It’s got their troops all over it, that makes it theirs,” he said sardonically. “Right of conquest and all that.”

Donesso rolled his gaze over to fix Harry with an even stare. “Are we to acknowledge the right of bandits to keep their spoils, then?” he asked. “An outlaw band is no less criminal for being large and well-disciplined.”

Jon shrugged. “The Sunset Company’s war against Myr was conducted properly enough, as we reckon such matters,” he said. “A challenge was issued with reasonable terms, the Company marched openly under true colors, it faced the Myrish army in open battle and defeated it honestly. When Myr itself was besieged they offered honorable terms of surrender, and when those terms were refused the city was stormed and sacked.” He shrugged again. “Everything was conducted according to the rules of war. If the Myrish could not defeat them, then that is their misfortune.”

Donesso frowned. “Perhaps,” he allowed. “But the matter is not as simple as deciding whether or not the rules were followed. The Archon has sworn to give the Myrish all aid within his power to retake their city. He cannot be seen to go back on his word. And in any case,” he continued, arching his eyebrow, “their raid into our borderlands was proceeded by neither challenge nor terms, reasonable or otherwise. They had suffered no provocation, had no reason to believe that war with us was imminent or even likely. Ask our border towns that lie in ashes, and the children who lie dead in their streets, if the Sunset Company abided by your rules of war, or if they acted as any bandit gang would have done.”

Jon steepled his fingers. “For the latter question,” he began, “I say that when one perceives that a future enemy has let his guard down, prudence demands that you strike a blow while you may. Do you deny that, even if the Sunset Company had not raided your borders, you would have allowed them to enjoy the fruits of their conquest unmolested? As for the question of the exiles, I would submit,” he went on, “that the Archon has kept his word admirably; if the Kingdom of Myr is so beset on the seas, it is due largely to the Tyroshi navy.” Donesso accepted the compliment with a small bow from his chair. “And yet despite that aid,” Jon continued, “the Myrish have not been able to capture even a significant town, much less their city itself. Does the Archon’s charity extend so far as to provide indefinite aid to powerless beggars?”

Donesso pursed his lips. “Your first question we will never know the answer to, given the circumstances. As to the second question, the pursuit of honor and profit has no limit,” he said, as if quoting a proverb. “We cannot be seen to withdraw from an honorable struggle empty-handed.”

“You might have to anyway,” Harry replied as he sat down on the third chair in Jon’s private solar, “if the Braavosi decide to involve themselves. How well did it end for Tyrosh the last time their fleets tried conclusions with the Titan?”

“Ser Harry, that will do,” Jon said in the same tone he had used on Robert whenever he had said something impertinent. “This gentleman is our guest.”

Harry flushed appropriately and ducked his head. “Humbly crave your pardon,” he mumbled.

Donesso gracefully gestured acceptance of the apology. “The Titan’s fleets are formidable, it is true,” he averred. “But even them we would defy for the sake of honor. It takes a year and more to build a fleet, but it takes a hundred years to build a reputation.”
Jon scratched his freshly-shaven jaw; he preferred to cultivate a short goatee and moustache rather than a full beard. “It may be,” he said slowly, “that we can convince Robert to leave by any claims upon the territory Myr held in the Stepstones when he invaded, as well as any claims Myr may have held upon Tyroshi or Lyseni territory in the Disputed Lands. That would provide the exiles with a homeland, if a truncated one, and remove at least one source of potential friction.”

Donesso frowned. “That might work,” he said after a long moment of consideration. “But on its own I do not think it would suffice. What might suffice is if Robert was convinced to drop this idea of our paying him, what is the term, weregild? We entered this war not just to assist friends and allies, but to avenge the insult offered our ambassador when he was summarily ejected from Myr and his property confiscated.” He spread his hands. “As I understand, the payment of weregild constitutes an admission of guilt; we are not guilty of causing this war.”

Harry laughed shortly. “A fine time you’ll have convincing Robert of that, Your Honor,” he said, sipping at his glass.

“Leave that to me,” Jon said, leaning back in his chair. “Robert may not accept no weregild at all, but he may be mollified with a nominal sum, given the circumstances.”

XXX

In my professional opinion, the best place to hold a confidential meeting is in a middle-class tavern, especially if it also serves as a brothel.

In your low-class winesinks and cathouses, see, the average customer focuses on either getting as drunk as possible as fast as possible, or picking out the first harlot that comes to hand who isn’t too unsightly and getting straight down to business. Someone who lingers over his drink, or who only seems interested in observing the whores on offer instead of actually choosing one, stands out; two people holding a conversation of more than a few words might as well hold up a sign saying “We are the Suspicious People you are looking for”. Also such places are so raucous that you often can’t hear yourself think, much less hear someone across the table who is trying to be discreet.

In a high-class tavern or bordello you run into the opposite problem in that the common rooms are so sedate that you can eavesdrop on even a quiet conversation at ten paces. And even if you have the lucre to spring for a private room you aren’t safe; a lot of those private rooms have spyholes where someone can look in to watch you and your partner of choice perform the horizontal estampie with you unawares. Not exactly my style, but I’ve gotten so much professional use out of it over the years that I can’t bring myself to condemn it.

But a middle-class tavern-brothel, one boisterous enough to conceal a casual conversation but sophisticated enough that you’re almost expected to linger over your drink and your choice of pleasures, is perfect. So when the embassy received a message from someone who signed himself ‘a friend’ and insisting that they had ‘critical information’ that they could only impart to ‘a discreet and trustworthy officer’ (which in this case meant me, much to my dismay), my return message directed them to meet me at The Maiden’s Head, a tavern-brothel in the tradesman’s quarter that catered to the wealthier sort of journeyman.

I had gotten halfway through a tankard of quite decent ale, and decided that if whoever-it-was didn’t show up in the next hour I was going to pick out one of the establishment’s jezabels and at least get some enjoyment out of the evening, when a little man with a face like a sad lapdog slid into the chair across from me and introduced himself as Beleo, a ‘friend’, to use his words, of Lord Merryweather. Apparently, he had been trying to report to the old man for days now but his manse was too heavily watched. He had just gotten to the part of his story where he was babbling out how he had gotten a message to the embassy through a fourth party and handed me an envelope which
he claimed held important information when I felt eyes on me.

I daresay I’m more sensitive to it than most, but if you stare at someone long enough and hard enough, they will notice it. Don’t ask me how or why because I don’t know, but it’s saved my life at least a dozen times over the years. Fortunately, I was able to keep the sudden twist in my guts off my face, Beleo seemed nervous enough already, as I scanned the room. Eventually, I found them.

“Don’t look,” I said, forcing myself to be calm, “but there are a few gentlemen at the bar who don’t seem to be very interested in their drinks.” Naturally, just as I said so, they got up from their seats and started walking over to us.

“Who are they?” Beleo asked, his eyes flitting from side to side anxiously.

I shrugged; the men in question had the sort of face common from Braavos to Volantis. “Damned if I know,” I said. “Tyroshi, Lyseni, maybe Volantene . . .” By this point they had reached our table.

“Come quietly,” one said in a distinctively sultry accent.

“Make that Myrish exile,” I said, trying to conceal my sinking heart behind a light tone. Ser Harry Flash’s Rules of Covertcy have never been published, nor are they likely to be published, but one of the first ten of those Rules is this: Never get involved with people who have nothing to lose if they don’t play by the rules.

“And bring the letter with you,” the one who had first spoken continued as if I hadn’t said anything.

I didn’t much care for his tone, which doubtless is what made me try to brazen it out; I’m not usually that reckless. Besides, I was still a young man in those days. “Letter?” I demanded in my iciest tone. “What letter?”

“The letter this one just gave you,” said another of the Myrmens, this one slighter than his colleague but no less dangerous-looking.

Beleo, to give him credit, could shift from nervousness to temerity in a heartbeat. “Me?” he asked in a voice that didn’t even quaver. “Do I look like a messenger boy?”

“We will not ask again,” said the third Myrmen, who even in workman’s clothes held himself in a way that all but shouted nobleman. “Come quietly, or . . .”

“Or what?” Beleo asked boldly, drawing a peasant’s knife and thumping the hilt down on the table.

The first Myrmen, who had positioned himself between us, drew back his cloak to reveal a shortsword. “Or we kill you and take what you have anyway,” he said amiably. “This way, you live longer. Outside, please.”

Well, there was nothing to do at that point but stand up and walk towards the door, which we both did. Fortunately, Lady Flash didn’t raise any slow thinkers, so halfway to the door I contrived to stumble against Beleo and roughly shove him halfway across the table he was passing with a shout of “Watch where you’re going, damn your eyes! Think a man of the Old Blood of Volantis can be jostled like a peasant, do you?”

While Beleo protested feebly from where he lay on the table, one of its occupants stood up, and up, and up. “You owe us a round and two bottles of the house vintage,” he said with a Northern burr so thick I could have cut it with a knife. “Along with a dozen gold dragons or so for taking the trouble
to teach you manners.”

In reply to this I put on my best sneer, looked him up and down with as much insolence as I could muster on short notice, and replied, in my best impression of a Volantene nobleman’s accent, “Going to make me, tree-fucker?”

There were a score of Northmen at that table, all younger sons of minor aristocracy with a few glasses of strong wine in them. Every one of them stood up at that, stripping off their doublets and putting hands to dirk hilts. The one who had first stood up, a man about my age with arms as thick as most men’s legs, grabbed me by the front of my doublet and managed to snarl, “Think you’re funny, do you . . .” before I keyed his arm into a shoulder lock and threw him into the Myrmen.

That, as they say, did it. In seconds the Maiden’s Head was a maelstrom of combat, with the blades coming out and the furniture beginning to fly, and I was crawling on hands and knees for the door. How I got out onto the street with nothing more than bruises, I’ll never know, but I did and I wasted no time at all in dashing to the stable attached to the tavern, dragging my horse out without taking the time to tack up, and riding back to the Palace and the safety of the embassy at best speed.

What happened to Beleo I never found out, but I still had his letter, and the contents, once I got around to opening and reading it, were almost worth the bruises.

XXX

“This is a joke, right?” Robert asked as Tregano Baholis finished reading out the preliminary terms of the treaty. “Jon, you can’t honestly expect me to accept these terms.”

Jon Arryn shrugged. “These are the terms that all the other parties are willing to accept,” he replied. “You’re the only one who hasn’t approved them.”

“Do you truly think that I give a damn what a pack of slavers are willing or not willing to accept?” Robert spat. “Donesso and Garros and Brachio can all line up and kiss my arse for all the good it may do them.”

Tregano set down the paper on which he had scribbled down the terms of the treaty and spread his hands. “Your grace, as unpalatable as these terms may be, they are the terms on which we can make peace,” he said simply. “As early as tomorrow afternoon, if you accept them today. And you must admit, they are not entirely unfavorable to you and your realm.”

Robert clenched his jaw on a sour remark; the truth was the terms were decent enough. The recognition of the Kingdom of Myr as a sovereign nation, the abolition of slavery and the slave trade outside of Tyroshi and Lyseni territory, and peace on the terms of status quo ante bellum were all more than acceptable. The provision that slaves of other nations visiting Myr on a temporary basis would remain slaves was difficult to swallow, but understandable given Tyrosh and Lys’s reliance on slaves to row their galleys. It was the other terms that truly stuck in Robert’s craw.

_The Kingdom of Myr renounces all claims on territory previously claimed but not actually occupied in the Disputed Lands and it’s territories in the Stepstones._

_The Kingdom of Myr pledges to not interfere in the internal affairs of the other signatories to the treaty, nor to encourage, condone, support, or render aid and comfort to any revolt, rebellion, or insurrection within the territory of the aforesaid signatories._
No signatory to this treaty shall interdict, harass, or blockade the commerce of any other signatory, upon pain of reprisal actions by the other signatories.

Tyrosh and Lys shall each pay reparations to the Kingdom of Myr in the amount of one gold dragon, or an equivalent amount in their currency, in compensation for the damage done to the property of the Crown of Myr during the war.

The first three of those terms were bad enough; at a stroke they would forbid the Kingdom of Myr from making any attempt to forcibly abolish slavery in Tyrosh and Lys. But the fourth term was what truly made Robert see red. For one thing, the amount was insultingly small, as if he were some beggar to be thrown a coin. For another, there was no mention in the treaty whatsoever of the hundreds of his people who had been murdered by the slavers, or of the reparations that were due to them.

“How can you expect me,” Robert said after explaining this to Jon, “to go back to Myr and tell my people that I agreed with the notion that their lives were not even worth mentioning?! You taught me better than that, Jon!”

Jon narrowed his eyes. “If you had remembered my lessons a year and a half ago,” he said coldly, “we would not be here and you would not have to accept these terms. We are here,” he continued, his voice rising as he leaned forwards over the table, “because you chose to act like a child told it could not have a toy instead of a king. Every drop of blood spilled is on your head, boy!”

Tregano slapped his hand down on the table with a sharp crack. “Enough, both of you!” he snapped. “You are a king and the first officer of a king. Comport yourselves accordingly, if you please.” As Robert and Jon subsided, both glaring daggers at each other, Tregano sat back in his chair. “Your Grace,” he said in a more moderate tone, “I am informed by the Sealord that he personally considers these terms to be objectionable. However, for the sake of the commerce that his people depend upon for their livelihood, he is willing to accept them and lend of the Titan’s strength to see that they are observed. The Council of Thirty has already voted to approve an arrangement wherein thirty of our galleys, based out of Dragonstone and Estermont, will patrol the southern Narrow Sea and the Stepstones to enforce the terms of the treaty in conjunction with a squadron of King Stannis’ fleet. You may be assured that the captains will be scrupulous in carrying out their duties. If you wish to add a squadron of your own to this fleet, they will be more than welcome so long as they abide by the terms of the treaty.”

Robert scowled. “What’s in this for you, anyway?” he asked. “I don’t recall seeing anything in the treaty that redounded to Braavos’ benefit.”

“Two things,” Tregano said. “Firstly, it redounds greatly to the honor of Braavos that her good offices were instrumental in stopping a war and restoring peace and commerce. Secondly,” his face split in a grimly triumphant smile, “this treaty constitutes the greatest defeat ever handed to the forces of slavery. In one stroke, slavery and the slave trade will be eliminated from almost the entirety of the Narrow Sea, save for the Stepstones. We have fought against slavery for more than a thousand years, Your Grace, and in all those centuries we have suffered defeats as often as we have celebrated victories. A victory as great as this will be celebrated loud and long by every man, woman, and child who swears allegiance to the Titan.”

Robert nodded. “There’s a lesson in that, I suppose,” he said sourly. “Take a hollow victory when it offers itself, instead of holding out for a perfect victory and going down to defeat, or something like.” Pushing away from the table and standing to his feet, he stalked over to the window and glowered down at the city below. “Suppose I accepted these terms,” he said slowly. “What else could I expect to get, from either of you?”
Tregano concealed a smile. “I’m sure the Iron Bank would be more than willing to open a branch in Myr city,” he said. “Master Nestoris would be able to tell you more than me, but I can tell you that the best help to commerce known to man is readily accessible credit. And no one in the world, Your Grace, can offer more credit on better terms than the Iron Bank.”

Jon shrugged. “The treaty will forbid you from recruiting in the Seven Kingdoms,” he said, “but it doesn’t prevent people from sailing from Westeros to Myr. Any man who volunteers to join your army would have to give up their inheritance rights in the Seven Kingdoms, but they would still be free to sail if they can afford the price of passage. In addition to which,” he continued, his voice turning speculative, “the treaty does not forbid the Iron Throne from shipping men to Myr as we would ship them to the Wall. Any man sentenced to exile, as Ser Jaime was, could certainly be put on the next ship to Myr.”

Robert glowered down at the city for a while longer, and then turned back to the two other men. “Very well,” he rumbled. “I will sign the damned thing. But mark me, my lords; I dislike being forced to accept the unacceptable. I wish it to be entered into the record that I am only accepting these terms because I have no other choice if I wish to preserve my people and my kingdom. And when this treaty’s odiousness outweighs its usefulness, my hammer will not sleep.”

XXX

I didn’t get to see Robert and his household march down to the ship that would carry them back to Pentos, as it happens. Officially, I was excused from duty that day on account of I had been on duty for the two sennights prior and I was under orders to take the day off. Unofficially, it was so I could set up in a top-floor room in a certain tavern with a bottle of surprisingly decent Arbor red and wait for someone to show up; which they did, about an hour after I had taken a seat in the far corner of the same wall that held the door.

He wasn’t very extraordinary in appearance; one of your small, neat men with the sort of face that will blend into half the crowds in the world. If it weren’t for the heavy-looking sack he was carrying over his shoulder and the feline way in which he moved, I’d never have pegged him for an assassin.

“Good morning,” I said brightly as he closed the door. “Care for a drink?”

To his credit, he hardly even flinched; just a momentary start, a slight stiffening of the shoulders and the neck, and then he was looking at me with some of the coldest eyes I have ever seen. And keep in mind, I’ve been in more than my share of staring contests. The only man I ever met who could unequivocally beat this bird in a staring match was Tywin Lannister.

“Thank you, no,” he said finally, having not moved from where he stood with one hand on the doorknob. I could tell already that the only reason he hadn’t tried to kill me yet was that he wasn’t quite sure of what exactly he had walked into. After all, he had thought that he would have a nice private room to commit a murder from, and here was a big Westerosi with an educated accent that belied his tradesman’s clothes, apparently without a care in the world or a weapon in his hands, offering him a drink. “I was unaware this room was already occupied.”

I gave a self-deprecating smile. “Yes. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the innkeep about me, actually. See, I didn’t tell him I was taking a private room.” In actuality I’d slipped him a few stags in order to keep quiet about my presence, but I didn’t want this cove or one of his friends thinking he’d betrayed them.

“Lovely view this room has, eh?” I went on, indicating the window. “Day as clear as today, you can see right down to where the High Street meets the docks. Not a chimney or a dovecote in the
way and barely a hundred yards distance."

"Indeed," says the small man with the cold eyes. "I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who gave you the notion to come here to this room in this tavern?"

I shrugged. "Afraid I can’t, old boy. See, I don’t know where the information that brought me here came from. Just an anonymous letter dropped by the embassy."

The other man pursed his lips and nodded. He still hadn’t moved away from the door and he was still standing in the sort of balanced, absolutely still posture you only see in acrobats, dancers, and fighting men, and even then only in the good ones. There was a distant swell of noise from outside, which I made of show of listening to by placing my left hand, which had been resting on the table, to my ear; my right hand still held my wineglass. "That’ll be King Robert passing through, I’ll wager," I said. "Give it another minute or three and he’ll be aboard ship. And once he’s aboard and everything’s settled . . ."

"Down to Myr he goes," the man said. "Home again, home again, for him." His eyes, if anything, grew even colder, and I could tell that they weren’t looking at me anymore. "My father was a glassblower in Myr, a free glassblower," he said, his sultry accent thickening a little. "He wanted me to go into the trade, like my older brother, but I didn’t have the lungs for it. Fortunately, I did have a head for numbers; one good enough that the Master my father worked for got me a job as a clerk in a trading house. Eventually, I got so good at that job that the head of the house sent me to Tyrosh, where one of his partners needed a replacement clerk who wasn’t tied to any of the houses there. My ship sailed the day before the Sunset Company came over the border." His voice was as even and measured as if he were discussing the weather, but I could still hear the pain and hatred underneath it. "My older brother was killed at Tara," he went on. "My father, my uncles, and my goodbrother were killed during the siege or the assault. My mother, my aunt, my goodsister and my two sisters were raped during the sack; my goodsister died in the process and my mother killed herself afterwards. My sisters managed to get on a ship and join me in Tyrosh, but they aren’t right; Vellona still cringes at the sight of me, sometimes, her own brother, and Meshora can’t sleep unless the door to her room is locked, barred, and wedged shut. I don’t know where my aunt is. The shop where my father and older brother worked, and where four generations of my family have worked, was burned half to the ground and is now a barracks for the City Watch, or so I am told." His eyes focused back on me. "Will I ever get to go home, ser whoever-you-are?"

All I could do was shrug. "Don’t ask me, old boy. I’m just a knight in the service of King Stannis, gods bless him. When he, or one of his officers, says unto me, ‘go’, I go, and when they say unto me, ‘do this’, I do it. What they choose to make out of where I go and what I do for them is their problem and none of mine, so long as they do right by me and my family.” I indicated the bottle sitting on the small table in front of me. "Sure you don’t want a drink? It’s really quite good, for this sort of establishment."

He shook his head. "Thank you, but no." He flicked a glance at the window, through which the noise of the crowds was coming only faintly. "It would appear that there is no purpose to my remaining here, anyways." Looking back to me, he raised an eyebrow. "Will you allow me to leave, or will I have to cut my way out?"

He was, as I have said, not a particularly big fellow; perhaps five feet high and maybe a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet and wearing heavy clothing. That said I wouldn’t have wanted to try conclusions with him under the conditions we were in at the time. I had left my sword and my armor at the embassy, and all my warlike equipment in that room consisted of a leather doublet and a baselard, the better to seem like a commoner, if a well-off commoner. On the other hand, it wouldn’t have done to let him know that I was reluctant to pick a fight. Undersized or not, this
fellow struck me as the sort who would fasten on any weakness and not let go until you stopped breathing. “I’m under orders not to kill you,” I said as a result. “Be inconvenient for our hosts if one of their guests goes around knifing people. Besides, we’ve just ended a war; be bad form to start another one before the ink’s dry on the peace treaty.”

He nodded. “I imagine so. You said you serve King Stannis?”

“I have that honor.”

“Then our paths will probably cross again someday,” he said. “May I ask your name?”

Now, it’s a bad idea to let the other side know who you are, as a general rule, but I was young at the time and I didn’t see how it cost me to give the fellow my name. After all, I had won this round. So I stood up slowly, making sure to keep my hands clear of my baselard, clicked my heels, and bowed shortly, maintaining eye contact as I did so. “Ser Harry Flash, at your service.”

“Stallen Naerolis of Myr, at yours,” he replied. “I hope you won’t mind if I don’t wish you good luck? Nothing personal, you understand; strictly a matter of business.”

“Not a whit,” I answered him. “Doesn’t sound like you have any good luck to wish on someone anyway.” If I hadn’t known better, I’d have sworn his eyes had flashed red in that instant from concentrated hate. But then, I’d been running on about half my normal amount of sleep per night, so maybe it was just me. “The sele of the day to you.”

“And you,” he said, courteously enough, as he shouldered his heavy sack again and left the room, but not my life. If I had known how many sleepless nights and grey hairs that little man would give me over the years, I’d have taken my chances right there in that room, if only for the sake of my peace of mind. But then, I’m a knight, not a fortune-teller, so how was I to know?
The Gift of Death

Eddard narrowed his eyes at the sight of the quintet of horsemen riding out from the Dothraki host under a flag of truce, with another man jogging along behind them. Turning to Akhollo, he jerked his head at the delegation. “Do you think they mean it?” he asked. “The flag of truce?”

Akhollo nodded. “Dothraki respect truce-flags as much as Andals do, Lord Stark,” he said gravely. “On the plains it is death to attack a messenger. The one on foot will probably be a slave who speaks Valyrian or Common Tongue; they will not expect walkers to speak Dothraki.”

Eddard nodded. “Ser Brynden,” he called over to where the Blackfish sat his horse. “You have command in my absence. Be ready to intervene if things go wrong.” As the Blackfish waved acknowledgment Eddard turned to the captain of his household, one of the ten survivors of the twenty Cerwyn men who had formed his original guards. “Daimh, I’ll need you, Aralt, Niall, Dael, and Gram, and a flag of truce. The rest of the household to remain here until we return, but to stand ready to ride to our aid.” Daimh, a stolid, blocky man whose already-wide shoulders looked positively deformed when he was in armor, clanked his gauntleted fist off his breastplate in salute and turned to snap orders at the other household men.

Twenty minutes later, Eddard and his men were reining in before the Dothraki delegation, which had waited for them in the middle of the shallow stream that gave the broad, gently sloping valley its name. One of the Dothraki, a strongly-built man who seemed no less hale for the streaks of gray in his long, intricately braided and bell-festooned hair and beard, raised an empty hand in a ceremonious gesture that Eddard copied after a short hesitation, and then lowered his hand to gesture sharply with a snap of his fingers. The man on foot strode forward and bowed. “I am Harar, lord,” he said humbly in Low Valyrian. “With your leave I will translate your words for Khal Zirqo, and his words for you.”

Eddard cocked his head. “Are you from Pentos?” he asked; his Low Valyrian was more conversational than truly fluent, but he had picked up the accent.

Harar nodded. “Born and raised, my lord, until I was sold to the khal ten years ago by . . .” The Dothraki who had gestured Harar forward, and who Eddard took to be Khal Zirqo, quite calmly drew a quirt and, leaning over, struck Harar on the back with it, accompanying the blow with a torrent of incendiary-sounding language. Harar, for his part, took both blow and scolding with nothing more than a bow to the khal and another to Eddard. “The khal bids me translate only, my lord,” he said, “and says that if I speak otherwise he shall flog me further when the day’s business is over.”

Eddard tightened his hands on the reins of his courser until his gauntlets creaked. “In that case,” he said, restraining his fury with an effort of will, “I ask the khal what his business is in these lands, for none ride armed in Myr unless they swear fealty to the king.”

As Harar translated Eddard’s words into the rough gutturals of Dothraki, the khal laughed, as did the four other men who rode with him and who Eddard took to be his household men, or bloodriders as Akhollo had told him they were called. “Khal Zirqo says that the Dothraki ride where they please, as they please,” Harar said as the khal spoke. “He says also that he spits on this king of whom you speak, who thinks that he can command free men as if they were slaves.”
“Tell him,” Eddard replied, “that he has not answered my question. What is his business in these
lands?”

“Khal Zirqo says that he has heard that there is a new king in Myr,” Harar answered. “He says that
wishes to meet this king, and ask him for such gifts as the magisters gave.”

Eddard nodded. “And what,” he asked, “will the khal give in return if we give him these gifts he
asks for?”

At Harar’s translation, Zirqo smiled as a tiger might smile. “Khal Zirqo says,” Harar said as Zirqo
spoke slowly and with evident relish, “that if he receives worthy gifts, then he will give your king
the gift of his friendship. He says further that if the gifts he receives are unworthy, then he will do
to you what he did to the Pentoshi, and burn your villages and take your people as slaves, to teach
you what gifts are worthy of a khal.”

A fist gripped Eddard’s heart. “He took slaves in Pentos?” he asked, his voice suddenly cold.

“Khal Zirqo says that the Braavosi who now rule in Pentos refused to give him slaves,” Harar
replied. “So he took the number of slaves that he would have been given by the old rulers of
Pentos. He says that it is the way of the world, that the strong do as they please, and that the
Dothraki are strong. He says further that he will do the same here, unless your gifts are worthy;
your men, he says, are weak, and cannot stand against his riders. You would have done as well to
leave them in their homes and come alone, he says, they would have been as much use to you.”

One of the bloodriders added a comment which provoked chuckles from his fellows and the khal,
who gestured at Harar. “Chokho, who is bloodrider to the khal, says that his khal misspoke,” Harar
said. “In bringing your men here, he has saved the khal the bother of rooting them out of their holes
like a woman hunting marmots.”

Eddard held out a hand to still the growing murmur of anger from his household men, who had
been listening to the exchange. “Tell the khal,” he said softly, lowering his hand and shifting his
grip on the reins of his horse, “that I will give him the same gifts that we gave the magisters of
Myr, if he does not apologize for the insults he has given.”

There was a short silence as Harar translated Eddard’s words, and then Zirqo threw his head back
and roared laughter, as did his bloodriders. Finally, wiping tears from his eyes, Zirqo gasped out a
sentence to Harar, who turned back to Eddard and bowed. “Khal Zirqo says that he does not know
what you mean,” he said, “but you will have to give him greater gifts than you gave mere
magisters, if you are to keep his friendship.”

“He misunderstands,” Eddard said, spurring his horse forward so that he closed with Zirqo. “We
gave the magisters the gift of death.” And with that, he swept his longsword out of the scabbard
and swung it in a flat arc that drove the last two inches of the blade across Zirqo’s throat.

There was a long moment of stillness, broken only by Zirqo clutching at his throat and gobbling
horribly as blood flowed from the wound and sprayed from his mouth, and as he fell from his horse
the spell was broken. The bloodrider who had spoken, Chokho, roared incoherently and drew his
arakh, followed in the next heartbeat by the other three bloodriders. Eddard had enough time to
close his visor before they were on him, with his household men adding their spears and swords to
the fray moments later.

XXX

Five hundred yards away with the rest of the khalasar, Sajo gaped as Khal Zirqo fell from his
saddle. No one, no one, broke the protection of a truce flag. It was literally unthinkable. And yet
the Myrman had killed the khal like a dog, and the parley was turning into a battle before his eyes.

Beside him, his cousin Qhodovvo was gagging in outrage. “Blasphemers!” he finally roared, his voice a trumpet of fury breaking the shocked silence that had fallen over the khalasar. “Desecrators! Hell shall be thy portion for this!”

A deep-throated baying rose from the host, those few men who hadn’t been mounted tightening girths and leaping into the saddle. In the center of the host Pobo walked his horse forward and drew his arakh. “Forward!” he roared. “Avenge the khal! Kill, brothers, kill! Kill them all!”

As one man eleven thousand riders went from a standing start to a charge in five strides, and the ululating howl of the bloodscream split the heavens.

XXX

Brynden Tully watched, horror-struck, as the parley turned into a brawl and the Dothraki charged. But only for a moment; even the shock of witnessing a war crime could not override his veteran’s instincts. So after only a single shouted obscenity, he turned to one of the gallopers waiting near to hand. “My compliments to Ser Lyn Corbray,” he said calmly, “and he is to charge the enemy immediately.” As the galloper spurred his horse away, he turned to his trumpeter. “Sound prepare to receive cavalry,” he ordered. As the trumpeter raised his instrument and sent the brassy notes echoing away, Brynden drew his sword and held it in a loose grip down by his right leg. Damn it, Ned, he thought savagely. Why did you have to go and do that?

XXX

Contrary to popular belief, a charge of heavy cavalry does not go straight from a standing start to a gallop.

For one thing, a horse as large as a courser or a destrier simply cannot accelerate that fast, especially not when it’s weighed down by its tack and barding, its rider, and his armor and weapons, all of which can easily come to three hundred pounds or more. Coursers and destriers are plenty fast in a straight line, but it takes them a while to get up to speed and once they do they can’t turn very quickly. For another, even a lightly-encumbered horse can only gallop for about two miles before fatigue sets in; a barded horse carrying an armored knight, even one as strong as a destrier, can only maintain a gallop for about a mile.

Moreover, heavy cavalry, and especially well-drilled heavy cavalry, almost never gallop. At the gallop it is almost impossible to maintain cohesion and heavy cavalry live and die by cohesion. A charge that loses cohesion will strike the enemy like a spray of water droplets; individually hard but diffuse, and easily absorbed by the enemy. On the other hand, a charge that maintains its cohesion so that it strikes the enemy as a solid wall of armored men and horses tipped by an unbroken line of lance-heads will strike the enemy like the fist of an angry god.

So when Ser Lyn Corbray’s trumpeter sounded the advance, the three hundred knights and men-at-arms on the field that day started at the walk. A dozen strides later, they accelerated to the trot, maintaining their alignment with the ease of long practice. Three hundred armored men on heavy horses made the earth shake as they rode, even at a pace as slow as the trot; when, just after splashing across Narrow Run stream, two hundred yards from the oncoming Dothraki, they accelerated to the canter, the thunder of hooves was loud enough to drown out speech.

Each man, now, was effectively a guided missile as the lances swept down to form a leading edge of steel before the wave of armored horses. Taken together, a knight, his horse, and their gear came out to an average of six hundred and eighty kilograms of mass, moving at more than six and a half
meters per second. That combination of mass and acceleration meant that, upon impact, each knight would deliver almost four and a half thousand newtons of force through a lance-head that ended in a point as narrow and sharp as a bodkin. Even against armored men, that much force could kill.

The Dothraki reckoned a man’s courage by the amount of armor he wore; the more armor he wore, the less his courage. A true man relied on his skill and his speed to avoid injury. In the quicksilver slash-and-fade warfare of the plains, that sort of thinking had merit; the more armor a man wore, the faster he exhausted his horse, and he whose horse was the first to lose its wind was the first to die. In a head-on charge against armored lancers, it was suicidal.

Especially since the Dothraki’s charge had been broken when it reached Eddard and his four remaining men (Niall had died under a bloodrider’s arakh), who had met the Dothraki charge with one of their own; the odds against five men surviving a charge against eleven thousand were laughably long, but in mounted combat it was always better to meet a charge with a counter-charge rather than meet it at the standstill, and so Eddard and his men had attacked. When they met the Dothraki it caused the men closest to their point of impact to turn in towards them, causing an eddy-like effect in the center of the Dothraki host, while on either side the riders charged on towards the infantry. As a result, when the Myrish knights reached the Dothraki, they hit, not a charging enemy, but a swirling mass of men and horses, many of whom were either at an angle or even broadside on to them.

The effect was roughly akin to that of a ten-pound sledgehammer swung down onto a bowl of eggs. A rippling chorus of wet, crackling thuds momentarily drowned out the thunder of hooves as the lances tore through the nomad riders. The Dothraki horses, tireless, stout, and dauntless as they were, simply did not have the mass to meet heavy coursers and destriers at the charge. The force of impact as the western chargers met them shoulder-to-shoulder drove many of them back onto their haunches; some, screaming in equine terror, were bowled completely off their hooves. As the Dothraki reeled from the shock of impact, the knights and men-at-arms, who had trained to do exactly this from the age of seven, discarded the stubs of their broken lances, drew their swords, axes, maces, and war hammers, and spurred deeper into the fray, roaring their battle cries.

This would have been bad enough for the Dothraki. But while their center was being savaged by the heavy cavalry, their flanking squadrons were facing an even greater enemy.

XXX

Thoros of Myr had never been a very priestly man. In fact, if it were not for his skill at arms, his genial nature, and the fact that he had memorized most of the scriptures before his seventeenth year, he would almost certainly have been thrown out of the Red Temple in disgrace for drunkenness, fornication, and conduct unbecoming a novice in that he tended to punctuate his arguments with his fists. As it was, High Priest Danikos had simply shaken his head, remarked that the god had a use even for sots, lechers, and brawlers, and ordered that he be given extra weapons training and religious instruction. As Danikos had seen it, the best way to keep Thoros out of trouble was to mire him in either the classroom or the training yard as much as decently possible, hopefully teaching him self-control or at least leaving him too exhausted to get up to the hijinks that made him the despair of old Innes, the formidable master of novices.

So Thoros, who to his credit learned both quickly and deeply when given sufficient motivation, grew to become one of the Red Temple of Myr’s most formidable warriors and learned scholars, although his fondness for wine, women, and violent disputation meant that he never advanced beyond the first grade of priesthood. Indeed, in spite of the orders that he be kept busy every waking hour, he had managed to continue his escapades, which climaxed in an epic misadventure.
in which he had helped drink the Pied Merlin dry, knocked out a glassblower for daring to dispute theology with him, and added insult to injury by seducing the man’s wife over his unconscious body. The morning afterward, Danikos, who had been thoroughly informed of Thoros’ doings by the City Watch, had called him into his study and informed him that he was going to King’s Landing to spread the Faith of R’hllor. This, he had sternly informed Thoros, was to be considered a punishment of exile in that he was not to petition to be allowed to return for at least a year, and also a favor in that it would put him beyond reach of the Glassblower’s Guild.

Thoros had been thoroughly miserable for most of his stay in Westeros. For despite his misbehavior he did have a young man’s zeal for the god’s service, and he had been unable to accomplish anything to spread the worship of the Lord of Light in Westeros. Aerys had not only been too insane to be converted, but after Thoros had told him (very carefully, not being entirely stupid) that no, he could not set a man on fire solely by the power of the god, he had lost interest in R’hllor’s faith generally and Thoros specifically, except for the paranoia he leveled at everyone. Robert, when he took the throne, had been too preoccupied with finding his lost betrothed, then too sunk in grief, and then too absorbed in forming the Sunset Company to discuss theology, although Thoros had found him to at least be a good drinking companion the one time they had shared a keg. As for Stannis, not only did he seem genuinely uninterested in theological matters, but the need to maintain the friendship of the Faith of the Seven and the influence of his Lannister wife had made it awkward for him to even receive Thoros, much less entertain the idea of converting. As for the other Westerosi, they had been quite happy with their seven gods, thank you very much, although only the nobles and the better sort of the burghers had been that polite about it; the smallfolk had been more vehement. The only comfort had been the availability of good wine and women of negotiable virtue, but even that had been restricted; the stipend the Temple allowed him hadn’t covered much beyond the cost of bed, board, and beer.

So, when the year was up, Thoros had petitioned to be allowed home, owing to his lack of progress and the unwillingness of making any. His petition had been granted, contingent on his good behavior, and he had landed eight days before Myr was besieged by the Sunset Company. As one of the best swordsmen that the Red Temple could command, he had been only a step behind Danikos when the Red Sword had marched to the Great Eastern Gate to overthrow the magisters and admit the Westerosi. It was Thoros who had led the party of slaves that broke open the defense of the captured tower, and when Kalarus, who had assumed command after Danikos was killed, ordered the Red Sword back to the Temple, it was Thoros who led the vanguard through the chaos of the streets.

And when the Royal Army had marched out from Myr to face the Dothraki, it was Thoros who was sent along to minister to those who followed the God of Flame and Shadow. “It will be good for you to be a priest, as well as a fighter,” Kalarus had said, looking more like an irascible old owl than ever with his bushy brows beetling over his stern eyes. “The god knows that I, for one, have beaten enough doctrine into your thick skull over the years. And you have the gift of the gab, as the Northmen among the Andals put it; if any man can reconcile them to the fact that our faith has never put aside the sword, as theirs has, you can.” So Thoros had stuffed the few possessions he was allowed as a low-ranking priest into a sack, donned his mail and his sword, and presented himself to Lord Stark for duty.

The march to Narrow Run had been pleasant enough, even enjoyable after a fashion, especially once Thoros had gotten used to sleeping under the open sky; for a man who had been born and lived his whole life within city walls, the thought of not having a roof over your head as you slept was alarming. What if it rained? But Thoros, to his mild surprise, had not only grown to like living outdoors, but had also come to enjoy leading the nightfire service. In the Red Temple everything had been so complicated that he had always been afraid of saying the wrong thing, and in Westeros he had been a stranger among a strange people, most of whom spoke only a few words of his native
language. But out here on the plains, with only a simple fire and a ring of soldiers seeking the comfort of their faith as they marched to face a dreaded enemy, Thoros had found the words springing to his tongue unbidden. Quite easy, really; simply keep the focus on those chapters and verses that spoke of the god’s love for his children, and the protection he would give to those who followed him, and the punishment he would visit on their enemies.

Which was exactly what he was doing now, as he strode along behind the lines of spearmen bracing to receive cavalry and crossbowmen spanning their weapons and loosing in volleys by ranks, with thousands of angry Dothraki bearing down on them. “Him that dwells in the shelter of R’hllor shall find refuge in His light,” he declaimed, reciting from one his favorite psalms to the Lord of Light. “You shall not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. Though a thousand fall at your right hand, and ten thousand at your left, it shall not come near to you. You shall see with your eyes how the Lord of Light punishes the wicked.” He broke off to nod to Septon Jonothor, who was also walking the lines and chanting the scriptures of his faith; a good man that, he reminded Thoros of Kalarus. No wonder they got along. Tramping onward he continued with the psalm. “He is the candle-fire and the sun-fire,” he chanted “and sees all that transpires in his light. Therefore we shall not fear, though the night draw in upon us, and darkness cover the earth, for still He is with us.”

All the while the drumming of hooves and the ululating bloodscream of the Dothraki was growing ever louder, until the commands of the sergeants and officers were drowned out, and Thoros, who had been trained to oratory by some of the best in the business, had to shout to make himself heard. “Thus sayeth the Lord of Light;” he roared, “I am the fire in your hearts, the light in your eyes, the heat in your loins. I am the sun that warms your days, and the stars that light the night. Though you walk under the shadow of death, I shall be with you, and you shall fear nothing. For I have kindled the fire of my strength within you, that the servants of darkness shall have no power over you.” As the thunder of the hooves and the howling of the nomads rose to a crescendo Thoros pushed through the volleying crossbowmen, planted his hands against the backs of a pair of spearmen, bellowed “Lord of Light, defend us!” and braced for impact.

He needn’t have worried.

In pursuit of a goal they deem worthy humans will travel for miles across burning desert or frozen tundra, march into storms of missiles, even deliberately starve or immolate themselves. The only limit to the trauma that humans will willingly endure in pursuit of a goal is the ability of the human body to withstand punishment. This ability to willfully disregard the instinct of self-preservation, however, is uniquely human.

Horses, to name only one other animal, are sane and sensible creatures with a healthy respect for their own skins and have a far more conservative idea of what constitutes an unacceptable level of pain or danger beyond which they will not go. It is possible, by dint of long training, to teach a horse to shoulder a single, small obstacle aside, but there is no amount of training that will induce a horse to run headlong into a large solid obstacle that it can’t see through. Horses are far too careful of their legs to endanger them so, and with good reason; for a horse, a broken leg is almost invariably fatal.

It is this confluence of equine biology and psychology that allows formed, well-disciplined infantry to stand against cavalry. Infantry in loose formation, or that are foolish enough to try and run, are meat on the chopping block for cavalry. But infantry that have the rigorous training and the iron discipline and the stony pride that allows them to stand fast with hundreds of speeding horses carrying heavily armed and very angry strangers bearing down on them have little to fear from cavalry. A lance can allow a horseman to outreath a spear, and horse archers do not need to
close to within arm’s reach to be dangerous, but infantry that maintain close formation and don’t break are immune from the kind of slaughter that cavalry can inflict on infantry.

The men of the Iron Legion who were on the field of Narrow Run that day might have been new soldiers, but pound for pound they were probably the best new soldiers of their kind in the known world. Ninety-nine in every hundred of them were ex-slaves, and the memory of the years of grinding servitude and unceasing degradation lay ever in the back of their minds so that they turned to their new lives with zeal comparable to that of religious converts. They had been slaves, but now they were men, free men. And this, they had been taught by the Westerosi sergeants who had trained them, was how free men fought; shoulder to shoulder with their comrades in the shield-wall, where the strength of the company was the man, and the strength of the man was the company.

They had learned well. And so on that day at Narrow Run, with the avalanche-rumble of the hooves and the war-cries of the Dothraki riders drowning out the orders of their officers, the curses of their sergeants, and the exhortations of their priests, and with the fate of half a world riding on their shoulders, the spearmen of the Iron Legion planted their feet, tucked their shoulders into their shields, and stood fast.

And the Dothraki charge broke like a wave against a cliff. All along the line the Dothraki horses baulked at the solid wall of shields and the hedge of spear-points, whinnying in protest as their riders sought to urge them on with curses and blows of their heels and the flats of their arakhs. Those Dothraki who had drawn their bows instead of their arakhs during the charge bent them now, and shot as only the horse-lords could shoot, but the tall kite shields and the lowered helmets of the spearmen offered few vulnerable targets. And while the Dothraki shot, the crossbowmen of the legions and the hundred Westerosi archers were also shooting. The crossbowmen were shooting by rote now, spanning their bows, levelling them at the Dothraki, and loosing their bolts without even aiming more than necessary to keep from shooting a comrade in the back, but with the nomads stalled barely forty feet in front of them aiming was unimportant. What was important was that the crossbowmen of the Iron Legion were loosing two bolts a minute in ranked volleys, and there were two thousand of them.

Behind the lines of the Legion, Ser Brynden Tully smiled. He had had his doubts about the Iron Legion, but he was certainly thankful to see them disproved. Now, with the Dothraki brought to a halt in front of the Legion’s lines and easy targets for the crossbows, the easy move would be to let the spearmen continue to stand, holding the riders at bay while the crossbowmen emptied their quivers into them. That, however, would mean giving the Dothraki time to think, time to realize their mistake in charging the Legion head-on, time to let cold cunning take the place of hot anger, time to reorganize themselves and exploit their advantage in mobility and firepower. Or, if they truly held foot soldiers in contempt, as Brynden was told, time to ride back to the aid of their fellows, overwhelm the knights, and then turn on the infantry again and submerge them.

So instead of letting his crossbowmen continue to shoot, Brynden raised his sword overhead and chopped it down to point towards the nomad cavalry milling in front of the Legion. “Advance!” he roared.

XXX

Although the common perception of the Dothraki was of a barbarous, anarchic collection of hordes that lived only by the law of the sword, there were, in fact, rules that governed Dothraki warfare. You did not poison water supplies. You did not deliberately set fire to the plains. And you thrice three times never broke the protection of a truce flag. To do any of these things was to arouse the wrath of the horse god in its most terrible aspect; the Midnight Mare, She who guarded the road to
hell and herded thither those who broke the horse god’s commandments. The best way to avert Her anger, it was known, was to destroy utterly those who profaned against the laws of the horse god, so that there was no need for Her to arise in dread and smite the evil-doer Herself, along with anyone who happened to be nearby.

These walkers who faced the khalasar of Khal Zirqo had killed him under a truce flag, apparently without warning or even provocation. All any of the Dothraki had seen was the khal and his bloodriders speaking to the walkers, and then one of them had whipped out his sword and cut the khal out of the saddle without even giving him the chance to fight back. There were greater sacrileges in the Dothraki religion, but that was well up the river, as the saying went.

So even though the walker cavalry (and wasn’t that also a perversion of the natural order of things?) seemed almost impervious to their arakhs, even though the walker foot-fighters were proving unnaturally, nigh-presumptuously stubborn, the Dothraki fought on. Their khal lay dead, murdered by treachery, and the law of their god had been shattered; even among a mild and pacific people there would have been anger. The Dothraki, the fiercest and most belligerent tribe the plains had yet spawned, had gone beyond anger into a berserk fury which drove them into the fray like a lash of fire. And if their arakhs were all but useless against the knights and men-at-arms, and of only limited effect against the armored infantry of the Iron Legion, their bows were still strong, their arrowheads still keen, and they still had the fighting ability that was ingrained into every freeborn man of their nation.

So even among the knights, they inflicted casualties. Ser Leofric Corbray, who had sailed across an ocean to seek a warrior’s death, found it when a Dothraki rider wrestled him off his horse, forced up his visor, and buried the broad-bladed knife that every Dothraki carried into his face. Ser Lanard Blackpool was shot through the throat by a Dothraki arrow that slammed through the mail aventail attached to the lower brim of his helmet and fell from his horse to choke his life out in bloody gouts, never to receive the lordship he had sought. Ten other knights were killed that day, either shot, wrestled down and stabbed through the gaps in their armor, or unhorsed and trampled, while two-score more were wounded to varying degrees. Among the infantry of the Legion, less heavily armored than the elite heavy cavalry, the losses were worse; of the seven thousand Legion infantry who took the field that day, two hundred and seventy-eight were killed outright, and twice as many more or less wounded by arakh and bow and knife and the lashing hooves of the Dothraki chargers.

But to inflict even that much damage the Dothraki suffered terribly. All four of Khal Zirqo’s adult sons died on the field of Narrow Run; Virsallo was shot through the bowel and liver by crossbow bolts, Rhozo’s skull was split to the teeth by a knight’s axe, Asso was cut almost in half through the midriff by a sergeant’s glaive, and Chomokko, khalakka of the host and deepest pride of his father, was speared through the chest by a man-at-arms’ lance in the first shock of impact as the knights charged home. Scores of riders had died in that initial charge, and hundreds more fell as the knights and men-at-arms rampaged through their ranks like steel-clad tigers. Deep in the host, only Daimh remained of the household men who had followed Eddard Stark to the parley, but the Iron Wolf, unhorsed and his plate armor spattered with gore, still stood tall and laid about him with his longsword, and the long hours of practice in which he had dueled some of the best swordsmen that the Kingdom of Myr had to offer paid off. When Lyn Corbray cut his way through to Eddard’s side, he found him in the center of a ring of slain nomads two and three deep in places, and still fighting on. Ser Vernan Irons and Ser Brynnan the Axe also made their names on the field of Narrow Run, standing back to back over the body of their friend Ser Lanard and cutting down all who came in reach of their sword and axe.

Against the Iron Legion the Dothraki suffered even more grievously. When Ser Brynden gave the order to advance, five thousand Legion spearmen shifted their spears to the level, raised the points
of their shields off the ground where they had braced them to receive the charge, and powered into the stalled nomad riders with a rush that was no less ferocious for having a short run. The spears lashed out like striking vipers, punching the Dothraki off their horses or else striking the horses themselves to spill the rider to the ground. Once unhorsed, any nomad that did not bounce back to his feet instantly and begin laying about with arakh and knife was pounded into the blood-sodden dirt by the shields, while even those that did make it to their feet were still easy prey for the spears. If a Legion spearman lost his spear, then their sharp-pointed shortswords came out and they reverted to the drill hammered into them by the Westerosi sergeants; keep your shield high to block the downward cut of the horseman, stick your blade into horse or man with a short, punching thrust, and repeat as necessary. If, by chance, you found yourself facing a horse head-on, then punch the top edge of your shield into the horse’s mouth until it throws the rider, and then press forward to finish him off while he’s still stunned. The crossbowmen pressed forward with the spears, either shooting point-blank or, after emptying their quivers, dropping their crossbows to draw shortsword and buckler and wade in. Sergeants and officers pushed forward with their men, gaivves and bills and halberds chopping down horse and rider, while from the rear Ser Brynden Tully led his small household into the fray.

After a time the Legion and the khalasar became intermingled, and it was during this time that the fighting was most ferocious as Legion spearmen sought to contain and beat down knots of recalcitrant Dothraki. Captain Akhollo, fighting as hard against his erstwhile people as he had against the magisters of Pentos and Myr, won laurels for his bravery and leadership that day as he led an improvised flying squad of crossbowmen who had run out of ammunition in vicious attacks to reduce such pockets. Two of Khal Zirqo’s kos, Sajo and Hazo, were killed in the chaos of the melee, Sajo cut out of the saddle by Ser Brynden and Hazo unhorsed and beaten into red ruin by hammering shields. Thoros of Myr and Septon Jonothor saved each other’s life; Thoros hacking down a Dothraki who had knocked the septon to the ground, and Jonothor using his staff to bludgeon another who attempted to stab Thoros in the back. The earth, formerly parched from the summer heat, became sodden with the blood and fluids of thousands of men and horses, until Narrow Run became a corpse-choked trickle of blood.

Eventually, as the sun drew down to the horizon, the Dothraki began to pull away from the field. They had fought mercilessly, gripped by red wrath, for five hours, but now that fury was ebbing and they began to see how many of their brothers and fathers and sons and uncles and cousins and nephews had fallen, and how many of the walkers still remained. But where another people might have succumbed to terror and fled the field in panic, the Dothraki still had their pride. They were the horse-lords, the undisputed masters of the plains, and it was beneath their dignity to show fear to walkers. So they retreated, not at a run or a gallop, but at a walk, fighting their way clear and turning back to tear into any who pressed them too closely. The Royal Army of Myr, for their part, let them go gladly; after so long in combat, even the hardiest knight and the most stalwart infantryman was teetering on the edge of exhaustion, and many men were collapsing where they stood as the battle-fury drained away.

Narrow Run would become one of the most written-about battles in history. Over the years various historians would hail it as the first defeat suffered by a Dothraki khalasar since the Century of Blood, the battle where the Iron Legion won its spurs, the battle that made the Kingdom of Myr, and various other lauds. But those were plaudits given many years later and with the benefit of considerable hindsight. On that day, the prevailing reaction among the Royal Army was summed up by Ser Brynden Tully, whose words were only recorded in the memoir of his squire. “Gods save me,” the Blackfish said as he cleaned and sheathed his sword, “but we made a right bloody shitheap out of this place.”
Author's Note: So this is the first of several chapters showing the immediate aftermath of the First Slave War. As a whole, this mini-arc takes place over the course of two or three sennights right after the Conference of Pentos and the Battle of Narrow Run.

Ser Gerion Lannister, Master of Whispers and acting Captain of the city of Myr, raised an eyebrow as the fleet sailed into the harbor. At his last count the Royal Fleet numbered only thirty keels; by his count there were at least twice that many longships and about a dozen fatter ships passing the breakwater that marked the outer perimeter of the harbor, many of them flying banners that he didn’t recognize. If it wasn’t for the fact that Victarion Greyjoy’s Iron Storm was in the lead with Greyjoy’s unmistakable silhouette in the bows, he’d have suspected a trick. That said, the fact that the galleys that many of the longships had in tow had their masts unstepped and their oars drawn in, with each of the towed ships trailing a Tyroshi banner in the sea behind them, seemed to militate against this being a ruse. Behind him the crowd was starting to murmur excitedly; evidently something had happened on the Sea of Myrth.

Twenty minutes later, the Iron Storm and another longship that Gerion didn’t recognize were tied up alongside the quay and Victarion Greyjoy had leapt ashore without waiting for the longshoremen to rig a gangplank, followed by a score of his crew and mimicked by a similar party from the other ship. As the rest of the fleet began to nose up to the docks, Victarion marched up to Gerion, followed by the other Ironborn, and slammed a gauntleted fist against his breastplate in salute. “Ser Gerion,” he boomed, “we are triumphant!”

The first outburst of cheering took a while to die down, even with Gerion’s household men thumping their shields for quiet. “You defeated the Tyroshi fleet in battle?” Gerion asked, keeping his composure with some difficulty.

Victarion nodded. “First, I must introduce you to the man who made it possible,” he said, gesturing back to the strange ship, where a party of Ironborn housecarls was carrying a coffin down the gangplank. As they advanced at a slow march and came to a halt before them, Victarion went on. “Lord Erik Ironmaker led a fleet of a hundred longships from the Iron Isles to pledge sword and sail to King Robert. On the way here they swept through the Stepstones with fire and the axe, sinking twenty galleys before turning to attempt the channel between Tyrosh isle and the mainland. By the grace of the Drowned God and the aid of Davos the smuggler, who I shall introduce to you later, they passed the channel unmolested, and sailed along the coast towards the city. Along the way, they came across a squadron of the Tyroshi fleet eighty galleys strong, which had been pursuing us towards the coast. Lord Ironmaker immediately ordered the attack, and his ships took the Tyroshi in their flank while we, not questioning where our aid had come from, turned and attacked into their front. The battle raged for most of that day, and when it was ended we had sunk, burned, or taken seventy of the Tyroshi galleys in return for the loss of twenty ships and fourteen hundred men killed or wounded. Among them,” Victarion gestured to the coffin, “was Lord Ironmaker, who was slain at the head of his men.”

The Ironborn who had first leapt off the strange ship, a grizzled, wolfishly-built man whose forked beard was done in a pair of simple braids, stepped forward. “This is true,” he said shortly. “I am Roryn Pyke, first mate to the Ironmaker, and I fought at his side in the battle. He led us over the rail onto a Tyroshi galley, and after clearing it led us over the other side’s rail onto another. We were only forty men, then, but the Drowned God was with us, and most of all with the Ironmaker.
Ten men he killed in as many strides, laughing as he slew, and he was the first to reach the enemy’s quarterdeck. There he fought the enemy captain, and although he was stabbed through the belly he beat the other man down with his hammer and crushed his chest. He died on that ship, with a smile on his face and the names of his dead shipmates on his lips.” Roryn, whose voice had been thickening throughout his tale, stopped suddenly, and if Gerion hadn’t known better he’d have sworn the other man was fighting back tears. “The Drowned God needed a strong oarsman,” he said finally, “and none of us was stronger than the Ironmaker. The god grant that I go as my captain did when He takes me.” He gestured at the coffin. “We brought him here,” he went on, “so that he could complete his last voyage.”

Gerion nodded solemnly. “What is dead may never die,” he replied, “and while I live the name of Lord Erik Ironmaker will be remembered. By your leave, I will light candles to the Warrior for him, and have Divine Offices said for his soul; courage deserves honor, even from the gods.” Roryn nodded, and the Ironborn standing behind him murmured approval. Gerion stifled a chuckle at the notion that he, whose family’s original claim to lordship was the ability to defeat Ironborn, would do such honor to a reaver, passing it off as a clearing of his throat, and raised his voice. “In the name of His Grace King Robert,” he declaimed. “I bid you welcome, my friends, and thank you for the aid you have given us unasked and unlooked-for! I myself shall arrange for your housing while you are in the city, and your wounded shall receive the best care we can provide. Tonight we shall provide wine and ale to drink wassail to the valiant dead, and food to feast their memory.” He turned to the crowd. “Let all take note,” he went on, “that these men are honored guests of His Grace King Robert. Let all do them such honor as they can, and treat them as kinsmen.” He raised his hands. “Hail to the valiant!” he cried. “Hail to the victory they have won for us!”

“HAIL!” the crowd roared, like storm-surf booming against the shore, and the cheers shook the skies.

The stars gleamed down as the shaman trudged into the ring of sitting and squatting tribesmen and sat heavily on his haunches. He set down his horsehide hand-drum with the careful deliberation of a man walking on the ragged edge of endurance, gripped a waterskin passed towards him with the same exacting control, and sipped slowly. When his eyes lost the glassy look that had been brought on by two days without food and with only minimal water, he looked around at the ring of questioning faces and shook his head. “Nothing,” he said heavily. “For all my entreaties and invocations, nothing. The god was silent. This only could I glean; the Midnight Mare is displeased with how few of the walkers we slew, but the blood we shed in the attempt has satisfied Her. We need not fear Her wrath.”

The momentary relaxation was dispelled by a question from the far side of the ring. “Has the god abandoned us then?”

The shaman shook his head with the first sign of vigor he had shown since rejoining the khalasar. “No,” he said, “the god is still with us. Even now I feel its presence. It simply will not answer my questions.” He shrugged. “If we were on the plains or in Vaes Dothrak, away from these cursed walkers and their pollution, maybe I could gain a response. But here and now . . .” he shook his head again. “The best I can say is that the god wishes us to face this trial ourselves.”

The Dothraki exchanged glances with one another, or else stared into the fire. If that was so, then it was almost as frightening as if the Midnight Mare was about to rise in fury. The khalasar had crossed the Myrish border with eleven thousand fighting riders in the prime of their strength. Now, if they mounted and armed every boy and elder who could sit a horse and hold a bow or arakh, they could put maybe three thousand riders in the field. Six thousand men lay four days dead at
Narrow Run, almost a thousand more were too wounded to fight, and hundreds more had split off from the khalasar in a collection of separate bands, either raiding the countryside to seek what revenge they could find or else riding back to Narrow Run to find the death that they had been cheated of the day of the battle. There was not a tent in the khalasar that had not resounded with the cries of people mourning the loss of a father, a brother, a son, a cousin. In the ring of nomads around the fire there was not a single face that was not at least drawn; those were the few who had refused to cut their braids, claiming that the treachery of the walkers removed the need to express shame at being defeated. The vast majority, however, had kept with tradition, and now looked almost small and ridiculous with their hangdog expressions and their shorn hair; they were the ones who had been outfought by the walker infantry, and the weight of that defeat overrode even the black treachery of the walker who had killed their khal under flag of truce. If the Dothraki reaction to disgrace had been suicide, almost all of those who had survived fighting against that terrible infantry would have slain themselves in shame at losing to men who did not even ride.

As it was, they felt that shame all the more intensely for having lost so definitively and survived. By all the Dothraki canons of manhood every one of them should lie dead on the field alongside their khal. That they had not only survived, but retreated from the field and left their khal’s body for the walkers to despoil ate at their souls like acid. “Better that the god truly abandon us,” one of the shorn ones muttered in a voice that unintentionally carried through the still air, “than that it should allow us to bear our shame without saying why.”

Pobo chopped his hand outward in a definitive gesture. “Whatever the god’s intention may be,” he said, “my path is no different. Khal Zirqo and his bloodriders are dead; as the only surviving ko, it is for me to escort the khaleesi to Vaes Dothrak, so she may join the dosh khaleen. That is the law.” He glanced around the ring. “While we escort the khaleesi,” he went on, “we can claim the god’s protection as we cross the plains. The other khals will not prevent me from fulfilling this last duty.” There was a wave of nods and gestures of agreement; if the walkers had blasphemed against the god’s laws, other Dothraki would still keep them. “Once we reach Vaes Dothrak, and the khaleesi is delivered to the dosh khaleen, our shaman will take counsel with the god, and learn the meaning of what we have suffered. What you do . . .” Pobo shrugged. “That I leave up to you. You may join other khalasars if you wish, and seek better fortune. For myself,” Pobo stood, his face solemn, “I will ride back here, and avenge my khal or die in the attempt. This I swear, before you all and before the god, as the stars look down in witness.”

Robert hated ships almost as much as Ned did. But where Ned’s dislike for ships began and ended with his vulnerability to seasickness, Robert’s distaste for them stemmed from another source entirely. It had been years now since it had happened, but there were still nights when once again he saw the Windproud breaking up on the rocks of Shipbreaker Bay, powerless to save his parents.

He hated feeling powerless even more than he hated ships.

So while he had accepted Justiciar Baholis’ offer of a flotilla of Braavosi galleys to carry him and his household back to Myr politely, he had done so with gritted teeth and clenched fists. The treaty that had been forced upon him was reason enough to be angry with the Braavosi, but then he had learned that he had deliberately been left ignorant of the Dothraki horde heading for Myr. Vito Nestoris, who was sailing with them to lay the groundwork for the opening of a branch of the Iron Bank in Myr city, had been profusely apologetic when Robert had confronted him, calling the gods to witness that he would have told Robert about the Dothraki in a heartbeat, if he had been permitted, but he was a man under authority. Giulio Armati had been less contrite, saying only that he had been ordered not to mention the Dothraki to Robert, and as a loyal servant of the Sealord and the Council he had had no choice but to obey. Robert had been sorely tempted to punch his infuriatingly composed face until it fell apart, but he had restrained himself. He needed Braavos’
money and friendship more than he needed to vent his anger on a glorified errand boy.

Even after reminding himself of that for the twentieth time in the past five days, Robert still couldn’t help but glower at the plain and undecorated walls of his cabin. While he had been getting trapped into a bad peace in Pentos, Ned had been left to face the Dothraki with barely six thousand men ready to hand, maybe seven thousand if he pulled the border garrisons north. And Robert was powerless to do anything about it. *I should have been there,* Robert growled in the privacy of his mind. *I swore to fight for my people. It should have been me on that field and Ned at that damned conference. Ned would have known how to answer Jon and Tregano and their damned words.*

If nothing else, Ned would have thought of something to forestall the most galling part of the whole rigmarole. After the treaty had been signed, Donesso of Tyrosh and Brachio of Lys had each snapped their fingers, summoning forward a pair of slaves bearing silk cushions, upon each of which rested a single gold coin. Robert had heard that Stannis was changing the gold currency of the Seven Kingdoms to stags and the silver to falcons, but the reparations offered by the ambassadors of Tyrosh and Lys were both gold dragons minted with the name and face of Aerys the Mad.

It had taken all of Robert’s self-control not to throw Donesso and Brachio through the nearest window.

Robert glared at the two golden coins where they sat, gleaming inoffensively, on the table of his cabin. He would have them strung on a chain, he decided, and wear them around his neck to remind himself of the price of defeat. He would learn how to fight with words as well as he did with his hammer, he vowed, and he would do his utmost to trap the slavers in such a web as he had been trapped in. And when the day of reckoning came, he would give Tyrosh and Lys their money back. In full and with interest.

He signed himself with the seven-pointed star to seal the oath, his hand trembling with suppressed rage.
The Cost of Treachery

The great hall of the Red Keep was designed to be overbearing. The second-largest chamber of its sort in Westeros after that of Harrenhal, it could comfortably accommodate more than a thousand people, all standing under the shadow of the Iron Throne. In Targaryen days it had been even more forbidding, what with the great dragon skulls mounted on the walls, but the banners that had replaced the dragon skulls were just as impressive in their way. Stannis Baratheon had commanded that every noble and knightly family who swore fealty to him was to send a banner to the Red Keep as a token of their fealty, and so the great hall was festooned with hundreds of banners. Near the entrance were the small pennants sent by landed knights and minor nobles, while midway along the hall were the banners of the middle nobility; the burning tree of the Marbrands, the Mallister eagle, the oak leaves of the Oakhearts, the bridge-and-towers of the Freys, the lances of the Gaunts, the flayed man of the Boltons, the Bracken horse, and the badger of the Lyddens, to name only a few, brushed against each other in the draft in no particular order. Closest to the throne were the banners of the great houses; the Tully salmon, the direwolf of the Starks, the Tyrell rose, the moon-and-falcon of the Arryns, and the lion rampant of the Lannisters, all flanking the truly massive Baratheon banner that hung directly behind the throne.

Marq Grafton had to admit, as he marched down the aisle towards the throne, that the banners were, in their way, an even bigger threat than the dragon skulls had been. Look, they said, and imagine seeing these banners flying above an army. Imagine what such an army would look like, across the field of war. Again, he congratulated himself on leaving the dragons when he could.

At the correct distance, some fifteen feet from the Stormguards standing at the foot of the dais that held the throne, he stamped to a halt, his captains doing likewise behind him, and bent the knee with a flourish of his short cape. “Your Grace,” he declaimed, “I am returned from my folly, and cry your pardon.”

Marq couldn’t see Stannis with his eyes cast downwards, but he could hear the raised eyebrow in Stannis’ reply. “Folly, you say, Lord Grafton? I was led to understand that you had taken careful deliberations before sailing to support Rhaegar the accursed.”

“I did, Your Grace, with the information available to me at the time,” Marq said, injecting a note of sorrow into his voice. “But I was misled by the information I had, and Rhaegar, it transpired, lied about his chances of success. Against your royal brother King Robert he had no more chance than a fox against a wolf.”

“And yet you remained with the Targaryens even after Rhaegar’s death, we are told,” came a high, cold voice that Marq could only guess belonged to Queen Cersei; he had seen her sitting at Stannis’ left hand. “What are we to think of this seeming obstinacy in your folly?”

“That I was but biding my time to see if something could be salvaged from the ruin, Your Grace,” Marq replied, “and after my hopes were dashed, that I was taking the time to plan most carefully for how I could escape the Targaryens while preserving my life and the lives of the men under me. The men now leading the exiles are as desperate as any robber band, Your Grace; if Arthur Dayne or Barristan Selmy had caught wind of my scheme, they would have slain any man who they suspected of treason.”

“You will refer to the knights you have just named by their proper ranks, if you please,” Stannis
said in a voice that was no less absolute for being completely calm. “Traitors under sentence of death they may be, but they have not been formally stripped of their knighthoods.”

Marq ducked his head even lower for a heartbeat. “As Your Grace commands. So I laid my plans, concealing them from Ser Arthur and Ser Barristan, and when the time came I escaped with my ships and those of the royal fleet, who also cry Your Grace’s pardon and beg to return to your service. If Your Grace will allow, I will also present the treasures that I was able to make away with in my escape, for it was in my mind to do what damage I could to the Targaryens in my flight, beyond merely depriving them of their ships.”

“Rise then, and do so,” said Stannis, to which Marq rose to his feet and gestured sharply at the small party that had hung back near the doors of the Great Hall. When the party halted at his side, he drew back the lid of the chest to reveal four dragon eggs.

“The treasures of House Targaryen, Your Grace,” he declared over the chorus of murmurs that arose, “an emperor’s ransom in dragon eggs. In addition,” he stepped aside and indicated his other offering with a sweeping gesture, “allow me to present Her Highness, Praela Targaryen, late queen to Rhaegar Targaryen, without whose aid my escape would have been impossible.”

“And what, pray, is the meaning of her being presented as a treasure?” Stannis asked. “We are forbidden from receiving people as gifts, my lord; such is the custom of slavers, which is forbidden under the law of the realm.”

“It was in my mind that she would make an ornament of your court, Your Grace, and a lady-in-waiting for Her Grace the Queen,” Marq said smoothly. “It would be more fitting for a queen to be held securely in a royal court, where she might remain in the style to which she is accustomed, than to force her into the keeping of the Faith, where she would be forced to pray to gods not her own.”

“Perhaps,” said Queen Cersei. “Lady Praela, is it your will to become our lady-in-waiting?”

Praela raised her chin. “It is, Your Grace,” she replied steadily, looking Cersei squarely in the eye with a gaze of iron as she did so.

Stannis nodded. “Then be welcome in our court, my lady,” he said courteously, before turning back to Marq. “And what, I wonder, do you wish in return for these presents you give us, Lord Grafton?”

Marq bowed low. “Only to be restored to my seat of Gulltown, Your Grace, and to leave it my heirs after me,” he said humbly, “and to be your loyal liege-man henceforward.”

“As loyal a liege-man as you were to Rhaegar?” Stannis asked, an arch tone entering his voice. “Your gifts we accept, with our thanks, but a good deed does not wipe out the bad. You and every man with you have committed treason; we would be within our rights to have you all cut down on the spot.” The Stormguards at the foot of the dais, and those who had lined the aisle to the throne, drew their swords with a subtle, manifold rasp of steel on wood and leather. Marq stared at the stone-faced young man on the Iron Throne, his jaw starting to gape; this was not how he had expected this to go. “However,” Stannis continued, “extenuating circumstances being as they are, we are inclined to exercise our prerogative of mercy. You who were captains in our fleet, we will accept you back into our service on the condition that you place your families under our hand as hostages to your loyalty. Any of you who do not wish to serve thus may serve us at the Wall. You who were captains in the fleet of Lord Grafton, you have committed treason not only against ourself but against our Hand Lord Arryn, and so at his recommendation we offer you the choice of the Wall or the sword; you may have the length of the night to consider your choice.” Stannis’ gaze swept the captains like an icy breeze. “Take heed; this is the path of mercy we offer you. If you
think it insufficient, then you may whistle for a better offer for all the good it may do you.”

Stannis turned his cold, cold gaze to Marq. “As for you, Lord Grafton, to you also we shall show mercy, in gratitude for these gifts you have brought us and the harm you have done the Targaryens by spiriting them away. Our castellan at Ghaston Grey finds himself so much at sea that he has need of a captain to hold the castle while he is away. We shall transport you there on the morning tide, in order to take up the duty, unless you would prefer to serve us at the Wall. Between the two, we would recommend Ghaston Grey; we are told that the weather is more pleasant and the scenery more appealing. You need not fear for the dragon egg you sought to appropriate for yourself,” at Marq’s panicked expression Stannis only nodded. “Yes we know about it, your man talked, and it is quite safe in your personal effects; it is beneath our dignity to commit petty theft. We hope it will give you some comfort during your term of office, which we pray will be long and uninteresting.”

Marq, who had only been able to listen in astonishment and growing fury as his plans collapsed around his ears, finally found his voice. “I’ve given you the second-largest fleet in the known world,” he choked out, his voice thick with anger. “I’ve given you the Narrow Sea on a plate! You and the Braavosi!”

“And you are still rich, still a lord, and still alive,” Stannis said coolly. “All in all, you are doing remarkably well for a confessed traitor. Do not let us detain you.”

Marq was still gorging fury when a pair of his captains took him under the arms and steered him out of the hall.

XXX

At the knock on his door, Jaspar rose from his desk and strode across the small room he had been given in what had been a Temple of Trade and was now the First Sept of Myr. Opening the door, he was struck momentarily dumb with surprise to see Septon Jonothor standing in the hall. “Good evening, brother,” Jonothor said pleasantly, his severe face mild for once. “May I come in?”

“B-By all means, brother,” Jaspar said, flushing as he stood aside; it had taken him years to overcome that bloody stammer and it still snuck up on him on occasion. Usually when he was taken off guard or unexpectedly summoned before authority, which Jonothor certainly constituted, given his stature in the Kingdom. As Jonothor walked in he closed the door behind him and gestured at the stool before his desk that constituted one of only three pieces of furniture in the spartan chamber. “Please, sit. I was just doing some writing when you knocked.”

Jonothor glanced at the desk, then glanced again. “You write poetry?” he asked interestingly.

Jaspar shrugged as he sat on his pallet. “Infrequently, and not very well,” he said ruefully. “Certainly nothing to rival Jon of the Star.”

“Who is?” Jonothor asked rhetorically, his eyes wandering. “Amen, the father smiled/How love’s a cajoler in you!/ No sooner said than lo/ the universe sprang to view,” he quoted, shaking his head as he finished. “Somewhat unorthodox, perhaps, but a brilliant poet.”

“Indeed,” Jaspar said, nodding; he had never gone wrong by agreeing with someone of higher rank than himself. “If I may ask, brother, what brings you here? I had thought you would be at the palace helping to plan the celebration of the King’s victory.” The army had returned yesterday morning, and the news of the destruction of the Dothraki khalasar had enhanced the festive mood that had been instilled by the Ironborn’s victory at sea. In turn, the news that had arrived only this morning that a treaty of peace had been concluded had led to an official decree that, as soon as King Robert landed, there was to be a public celebration, with a procession down the Street of
Freedom, a tournament outside the city walls, and, it was rumored, the elevation of men who had distinguished themselves in the sea-fight or at Narrow Run to the nobility and the chivalry. Preparations were already underway.

Jonothor waved a hand. “My part in the planning is already done,” he said. “I am here to say good-bye to you, before you leave us tomorrow.”

Jaspar froze, fear coursing through his veins. “Leave you, brother?” he asked hesitantly.

“Did you think Ser Leofric Corbray was reconciled to how the High Septon inveigled him into his scheme?” Jonothor asked, his voice blunt. “He told his son, who told Ser Brynden, who told Ser Gerion, who told me. We know what your true purpose here is, brother.”

The irony imbued in that last word made Jaspar cringe involuntarily. “It matters not,” he said, injecting defiance into his voice. “The first three ships to sail for King’s Landing after the blockade lifted each carried a copy of my report to the Most Devout and the High Septon. Give it two or three sennights, four at most, and they will know of your heresy. As for myself . . .” he drew himself up, straightening his cassock. “The Stranger waits,” he said calmly, “and I trust my Father to judge my soul justly.”

“Perhaps, but in your case He will need to wait a while longer,” Jonothor said briskly. “There is a ship called the *Salt Shore Lass* berthed at the fourth pier in the docks, sailing for King’s Landing on tomorrow’s evening tide. Your passage has already been arranged; the captain knows to expect you.” He gave Jaspar a lopsided smile. “Consider yourself lucky; if Lord Stark had been told of this, he may have sent you back to the High Septon in a coffin. As it was, that option was seriously discussed. Fortunately, Ser Brynden and Ser Gerion are more level-headed than Ser Lyn, and outvoted him.”

Jaspar gaped at him, the wind thoroughly taken out of his sails. “You’re letting me go?” he asked incredulously. At Jonothor’s nod, he deflated. “In the names of the gods, why?” he asked, utterly bewildered. “You consort with heathens, distort the teachings of the Faith, even take up arms and fight in defiance of Maegor’s law . . . what matter one septon more or less?”

“If you need to ask that, then you clearly learned nothing at seminary,” Jonothor said, his voice returning to its usual severe tone. “As for your charges, my defense is this. Firstly, that the nature of this kingdom requires me to ‘consort with’ and come to an accommodation with the pagans who make up a good half of the realm’s population. And I must say, I have found better men among the pagans here than I have in King’s Landing. Even the Ironborn at least have the courage to face their enemies with sword in hand. Secondly, I firmly believe that the gods welcome and reward all who fight and fall in their cause, regardless of their faith in this life. And thirdly, while I am sorely tempted to indulge in *tu quoque*, arguing *ad hominem* is the last resort of fools who cannot win otherwise.” He chuckled. “Do you know, when I first heard of how the High Septon had inveigled Ser Leofric into serving the Faith, I called him a fool? If he wanted to revive the Faith Militant, all he had to do was look across the sea to what we are building here.”

Jonothor gestured at the narrow window that looked out onto the street. “Consider this kingdom, brother,” he said. “Here men from more than a score of nations worship the Seven, the old gods, the Drowned God, the Lord of Light, the Moonsingers, and a dozen other deities. The sheer diversity of the people of this kingdom can break it apart at any time. There are only two things that provide the mortar that binds the stones of this kingdom together; loyalty to the King, and commitment to the cause of freedom. A cause, I remind you, that is approved of by the Seven, who offer a martyr’s crown for those who die in it.” Jonothor rose and began to pace the room. “Two hundred years and more,” he continued, “the Faith has dreamed of regaining the right to field the
Swords and the Stars. Perhaps not fervently, at times, but dreamed nonetheless. Well, here there are tens of thousands of the finest fighting men in this half of the world, all fighting for one cause that each creed and sect deems holy. And the High Septon would resort to trickery to resurrect the Faith Militant?” He stopped and spread his hands. “The Faith Militant has already been reborn,” he declared. “Or rather, the Faiths Militant, plural. They may not be the Swords and the Stars, but they are something older and truer than those orders ever were. The Faith Militant was not originally a separate class of knights and sergeants living apart from the rest of society, the writings of the patriarchs tell us, but rather the muster of every man of the Faith able to bear arms, whether noble, knight, or commoner, called out to defend themselves and their coreligionists against a common enemy. It was only later that the Swords and Stars were instituted, by High Septons seeking greater control over the fighting men of the Faith.”

Jonothor gestured towards the window again. “I say it again: the Faith Militant is reborn. It is composed of knights who follow the Seven, Northern men-at-arms who follow the old gods, Legion infantry who follow the Seven or the Lord of Light or the Moonsingers, even Ironborn reavers who offer to the Drowned God. And none of them needed to be trapped into pledging life and honor to the cause of holy freedom, as the High Septon trapped Ser Leofric. So before the High Septon levels that charge against me, I suggest that he reflect on how his own schemes along that line not only failed, but led to the death of a valiant knight and a good man who didn’t deserve to be forced into conflicting loyalties.”

Jonothor lowered his arm. “I’d tell the High Septon as much to his face, but I have been constrained not to,” he said with such artless candor that Jaspar, who had grown up listening to powerful men say things they didn’t mean, instantly believed him. “For me to take the leave of absence from my duties that such a journey would require, I would have to ask the King’s blessing, and it is considered doubtful that he would do so. Ser Gerion is of the opinion that if I were to appear before the Most Devout to testify, I would not leave the room alive, and he has said that he will make that view known to the king when he returns. So I shall have to remain here to await your replacement, or a summons from the Most Devout to answer the charges you have supplied them with evidence for.” His stern mouth quirked in a lopsided smile. “Allow me to suggest that they choose their messenger very carefully. Lord Stark may not be one of my parishioners, but we are friends, after a fashion, and the last time someone he cared about was summoned to King’s Landing to answer charges, he ended up chasing the guilty ones across an ocean seeking revenge. So I would recommend that they either choose someone who can speak softly enough not to rouse the wolf, or choose someone whose demise would not be grounds for a war.”

Jonothor nodded shortly. “Godsspeed your voyage back to King’s Landing, brother. Remember my words when the High Septon asks for your recommendation on what to do with me.”

As Jonothor showed himself out, Jaspar flopped backwards so that he lay flat on his pallet. Confronting danger wasn’t a new experience for him, but never before had so felt the shadow of the Stranger’s scythe rest so heavily on his neck. Nor had he ever felt so at a loss. He had come here expecting an easy victory, that all he had to do was hint at the High Septon’s stretching forth his hand and Jonothor would be delivered up to him, like a lamb for slaughter. Now, between Jonothor’s defiance and the support of the royal government for his heresy, he didn’t know what to expect.

XXX

The city of Myr had four graveyards.

The first, within the walls, housed the great and good; men and women of magister families or the richest trading houses. The second, outside the walls on the north side of the city, contained those a
grade or two lower; merchants, guild masters, and ship captains rested there. The third, also outside
the walls but on the south side of the city, held commoners; free guild craftsmen, small merchants
and traders, yeomen, and free sailors, for the most part. There was no cemetery for slaves; street-
sweeper, slaughterhouse butcher, glassblower, and rich family’s butler were all alike cremated and
their ashes scattered in the harbor when they died.

The fourth graveyard, and the newest, also rested outside the walls, and held soldiers.

More specifically it held soldiers of the Royal Army, and of the Sunset Company before them.
After the siege, the ground on which the Sunset Company had encamped was appropriated by the
Crown for the purpose of burying those who fell in royal service. Duly consecrated by Septon
Jonothor and High Priest Kalarus and its gates guarded by a pair of saplings that bade fair to grow
into truly impressive oak trees, it already housed just under a thousand graves, between the dead of
the siege and the dead of Narrow Run, whose graves were still fresh. The markers were simple
stone slabs, with at least the name and date of death of the deceased. In addition to this there was a
symbol of the deceased’s faith; the seven-pointed star of the Faith, the tree of the old gods, the
fiery heart of R’hllor, and for those whose faith was unknown the spear and broken chain of the
Legion.

It was here that Eddard was standing, wrapped in his cloak and staring at four graves in particular,
when Robert found him. “Your man Daimh told me I’d find you here,” he said, gesturing for Ser
Dafyn Otley to wait for him at the gate of the cemetery. “He told me that the Blackfish had torn
you a new arsehole after the battle and you’d taken it to heart. And since he couldn’t knock sense
into you, he’d be obliged if I would.”

“Daimh,” Eddard said dully, “needs to learn to leave well enough alone.”

“Does he?” Robert challenged. “Because from what I can see, some sense wouldn’t go amiss.
You’re not helping your men by beating yourself up about them, Ned. They’re dead, gods rest
them, and if what Ser Brynden tells me about how they died is anywhere near true, then even now
they’re eating and drinking like lords on the Warrior’s tab. Five men against eleven thousand?” He
shook his head. “Even for me, that’s a tall order.”

“That’s the point,” Eddard replied. “They deserved a lord who wouldn’t lead them to their deaths.
Gods know they deserved a lord with more honor than to kill a man under flag of truce. Or did Ser
Brynden not tell you about that?”

“Oh, he did,” Robert said, nodding. “And yes, that was more than a little stupid of you, Ned. That
said, your man Daimh told me that the man you killed had enslaved some of the people we freed in
Pentos after he had agreed not to.” He shrugged. “If he was stupid enough to brag about it to you,
then he deserved to get it where the chicken gets the hatchet.”

Eddard shook his head. “Whether he deserved it or not doesn’t signify,” he said. “The Braavosi
didn’t trust me to negotiate with them even before Narrow Run. You think they’re going to trust
me now? When that trouble with Septon Jaspar came up, Ser Lyn and Ser Gerion and Ser Brynden
didn’t trust me to handle it; Gerion said that we had enough troubles without me killing one of the
High Septon’s pets. Icy Hells, Robert, I can’t even properly blame them for not telling me; I’m not
sure I can trust myself. That buggering savage was sitting there on his horse laughing and I walked
my horse up to him and cut his throat without so much as a ‘have at thee’.” He shook his head
again. “You need a Hand who other people can trust to play by the rules, not a mad dog who can’t
keep his sword in its scabbard.” He reached up, undid the hand-shaped brooch that served as his
badge of office, and held it out to Robert. “Name me to what post you will, Your Grace,” he said
formally, “but I can no longer serve as Your Hand. I’ve dragged your honor through too much mud
Robert looked down at the brooch for a long moment, and then looked back up at Eddard. “If you truly believe that you cannot be my Hand, then so be it,” he said. “But keep the post until after the victory celebrations at least. I mean to make some announcements at the end of the tournament anyway, one more shouldn’t be too much bother. Until then, take as much time off your duties as you need; Ser Gerion has been doing well at the post since you went off to Narrow Run. Mourn your men, get drunk, find some pretty young thing and take her to bed, do whatever you need to do to get your head in order.” As Eddard lowered his hand Robert clapped him on the shoulder. “We’re still brothers, Ned,” he said simply. “Whatever you do, you’ll still have a place in my realm. So take heed; you are not to hurt yourself over this. As your king, I forbid you. I’ll have work for you to do after you give me that brooch for good.”

XXX

No matter how the Archon of Tyrosh glared at the map that took up the south wall of his private study, it stubbornly refused to show anything but the worst strategic situation the city had faced in generations. In the north, Braavos had effectively doubled its population base, resolved the food security problems that had kept them co-first-among-equals among the Free Cities with Volantis, and acquired an advanced base that put its galleys within easy striking distance of the southern Narrow Sea. In the west, the Seven Kingdoms were rousing from their inward-looking slumber and casting speculative eyes across the Narrow Sea. It had been decades since Westeros had looked eastward, as the last Targaryens turned away from politics to magic and the whims of their madness, but this Stannis who had been so unexpectedly raised to the Iron Throne appeared to have risen to the challenge magnificently. The swift crushing of the Dornish rebellion allowed him to spare attention to the Narrow Sea, the alignment of his interests with those of the Titan gave him an ally, and the return of his fleet gave him the means to impose his will independently. More Westerosi war galleys had been seen more frequently in the Narrow Sea in the past two months than at any point in the past five years, and once the royal fleet was properly retrained to obedience that show of strength would only multiply.

Worst of all was the threat to the east. The collection of mad adventurers that had taken over Myr had evidently turned themselves into a proper state with bewildering speed. Taxes were collected, companies of armed men under the sunset banner trained daily, roads were patrolled, they even had a navy, for all love. The Archon hadn’t thought of the Ironborn as more than pirates with delusions of grandeur, but those same pirates had all but wiped out a squadron of the Tyroshi navy, widely regarded as one of the three or four best navies in the known world. On land the borders remained unchanged, but that lack of change didn’t reflect the devastation that had been visited on the frontiers, which were only now starting to recover from the despoliation inflicted on them by the Great Raid. Nor did they reflect any grand feat of Tyroshi arms; the Sunset Company, or, more properly these days, the Royal Army of Myr, had yet to be seriously challenged on land.

Moreover, Myr had, by all reports, aligned with the Seven Kingdoms and Braavos. A Braavosi alliance had probably been inevitable, but the Archon, and most of the Conclave, had hoped that the reported bad blood between Robert of Myr and Stannis of Westeros might preclude any joining of forces; it was well known, after all, that there was no hate deeper or more abiding than that between estranged brothers. Unfortunately, it seemed that the Baratheon brothers had swallowed their dislike in pursuit of a common goal. Robert may have been cold towards Lord Arryn in their last encounter, but personal contretemps did not strictly mean anything in the business of thrones.

The fact of the matter was that the conditions that had fostered the military aristocracy of Westeros did not exist in Essos. Before the coming of the Sunset Company, Essosi wars had been essentially limited affairs, relegated to the care of professionals who could be trusted to conduct them in a
civilized fashion. To the people caught up in them they had been savage enough, but they were nowhere near as ferocious as the wars of Westeros, which were assumed by all involved to be life-or-death affairs, with stakes no lower than the continued survival of the participants. The great accomplishment of the Targaryens had been to change the implements of the old wars from swords and lances to betrothals and fosterings, but even Jaehaerys the Conciliator and Baelor the Blessed had not been able to tame the martial impulses of the Westerosi nobility.

The Archon had already undertaken plans to address the apparent imbalance in martial ability between his nation and the new Myrish state. He had been very fortunate to be able to acquire the services of Daario Naharis and the survivors of the Stormcrows, whose first-hand experience of the Westerosi way of war would be invaluable in the training of Tyrosh’s new army. The Second Sons, the Ragged Standard, and the Bright Banners had also been recently retained, at lowered prices, even, in return for the security of a long-term contract; he would have retained the Golden Company if Volantis hadn’t snapped them up. A motion requiring every able-bodied male citizen to receive military training had passed the Conclave smoothly, and the guildmasters had agreed to facilitate the process by encouraging their journeymen to enlist in the companies that each guild had agreed to raise. But to incorporate the separate parts of the new army into a whole and train them to a level of prowess that would allow them to contest the Iron Legion would take time. And thanks to Donesso’s damned foolish gesture, that time might be limited. Donesso was even now doing penance for that folly by staying on one of his smaller estates on the mainland, which just so happened to also be the one closest to the Myrish border. Hopefully he would learn the appropriate lesson about not bearding a tiger when you lived on the doorstep of its den.

Very little of this, the Archon reflected as he glanced at the border, would have been possible without the Great Raid. It galled him to be in the debt of Lyn Corbray, of all people, but the fact was that his raid had frightened the Conclave into permitting the use of extreme measures. Ordinarily, such an expansion of military strength, and its subsequent inflation of the powers of the Archon who was also Captain-General of the armed forces of the city, would have invited accusations of attempted tyranny. As it was, the Great Raid and the recent defeat in the Sea of Myrth had demonstrated to all and sundry that the barbarians were an existential threat that required extreme solutions. If anyone needed reminding, all they had to do was look to the exiles who had crowded into the Myrish Quarter. One glance at their drawn faces and the somber mourning attire that many of them had adopted was enough to drive home to anyone what fate awaited Tyrosh if the city were to fall to the Andals.

In the meantime, the map still showed enemies on every side bar one, and the Archon knew better than to put his trust in the Lyseni. If it suited their interests, they would throw him to the wolves in a heartbeat. On the other hand, they also seemed to be taking the threat of the Kingdom of Myr seriously; the Archon’s spies had reported that the Lyseni conclave had dispatched ambassadors to Astapor with orders to buy Unsullied. If any slave soldiers could withstand the blandishments of the Myrish and their infernal doctrine of abolition, they could.
Days of Celebration

The first tournament ever held in Myr took place over the course of two bright days, the first of which was given over to jousting and archery. In the first of these competitions Ser Jaime Lannister, his previously gilded armor now chipped, scarred, and battered from Tara, the siege, and the coastal war, carried all before him in a magnificent display of prowess, while Ser Lyn Corbray, Ser William Fell, Ser Lyle Crakehal, Ser Brynden Tully, and Ser Addam Marbrand dueled for the lower places. Eventually Ser Brynden took the second place, narrowly outpointing Ser Lyn in a series of tilts that had the crowds screaming their approval. In the archery contest the longbow competition was won by Sarra’s Will, a wiry Reachman who had stayed on with the new kingdom after his knight died at Tara, while the crossbow contest was won by Silent Jorro, a laconic, gloomy-faced Myrman from Ceralia.

Throughout both that day and the next the inevitable cloud of bookmakers and odds-fixers oversaw the most profitable day of their lives as almost everyone with some spare cash laid a bet on the outcome of a joust or a bout. A rash of self-proclaimed experts on the finer points of jousting, archery, swordsmanship, and other forms of martial contest, many of whom had only the vaguest idea of what they were talking about, did their part to drive the betting with assessments of men and horses and equipment. A few ended up having to run for their lives from people who had taken their advice and lost, but the majority, either by luck or nascent judgment, found themselves making accurate predictions.

The second day was reserved for more prosaic contests. The melee, judged too dangerous to risk the lives of valuable knights in, was replaced with single combat on foot in armor with longswords. Thoros the Red made a valiant showing on behalf of Myr’s native sons, advancing to the semi-finals to tumultuous applause from the freedmen. There, however, he met Ser Lyn, who took him apart in a display of sword-craft clinical enough to provoke more murmurs than applause. The lack of acclaim for Ser Lyn, however, was more than made up for by the approbation that met Ser Jamie and Eddard Stark, both of whom were only mildly less popular with the crowd than Thoros. Eddard, of course, was acclaimed as the uncompromising stalwart of Narrow Run, while if Jaime had seen less action on the coast, he had still seen some bloody skirmishes and had been a highly visible figure in the fortified towns of the coast in his black cloak and his increasingly battered gilded armor. Jaime and Eddard’s bout proved to be a long and grueling war, but eventually Eddard’s grim determination and ferocious in-fighting skill proved no match for Jaime’s slight advantage in speed and native talent and the Black Lion eked out the winning point in a last flurry of flashing blades that made the crowds roar. By contrast the match between Lyn and Jaime for the champion’s purse was almost an anticlimax, assisted by the fact that Jaime’s exhaustion from his bout with Eddard slowed him down enough to make him easier prey for Lyn.

It was during this competition, and especially his last bout, that Eddard was seen to wear a brown lace, of the sort a woman might use to tie her kirtle closed, wrapped around his left rerebrace, which occasioned no small amount of comment. Jaime shrugged and observed that if the Iron Wolf had a heart after all, it didn’t seem to impair his swordsmanship, Lyn narrowed his eyes and said nothing, Brynden stroked his beard speculatively and cast his eye over the ladies clustered around the royal stands, Gerion steepled his fingertips and frowned pensively, and Robert laughed and said “About damned time.” In the stands a certain woman held her cloak more tightly around her than the warmth of the day might warrant and refused to let her friends see if she was wearing her spare kirtle-lace.
After the swordsmanship came one of the freedmen’s events, derived from the training of the Iron Legion. Thirty men, one from each Legion company, donned the full regulation armor and kit of a Legion spearman and ran a single lap around the perimeter of the lists, cheered on by freedmen and nobility alike as they clattered along. The race was won by Tychan Breakchain of the fourth Legion company, a massively-built veteran of Tara and the siege inevitably known as “Little Tychan” by his messmates, who carried him shoulder-high to the royal stands to receive his award, which he did with some embarrassment as he was usually a withdrawn and monosyllabic individual. When Robert clapped him on the shoulder after handing over his winner’s purse Tychan blushed bright red, muttered something unintelligible, and all but died standing up as his comrades carried him away for a stiff drink.

After the race came the wrestling, an event that had been added in tribute to the Ironborn who had maintained the honor of the Myrish navy. Every knight learned to wrestle as part of their training, and every peasant learned at least some rudiments of rough-and-tumble, but in the Isles wrestling was an art and the team the Ironborn entered swept the field. The final bout between Victarion Greyjoy and Dagmer Cleftjaw was even longer and more hard-fought than Jaime and Eddard’s sword fight, and eventually ended in a draw at two falls each due to mutual exhaustion. Roryn Pyke placed third after a cagy, tactical match against Ser Harras Harlaw, who redeemed his poor showing in the jousting with a ferocious performance in the ring.

This cleared the stage for the last competition of all, the push-of-war. Two teams of ten men from separate companies of the Legion, each man invariably one of great size and massive strength, in full spearman’s panoply locked their shields and sought to physically push each other out of the ring. This unprecedented competition proved an immediate hit with the crowd, and the victory of the team of the fifth company was met with even greater applause than Jaime and Eddard’s match in the sword-fighting.

From there, those with invitations retreated to the inner courtyard of the Palace of Justice, where places for five thousand people had been set to dine at the Crown’s expense. For those not invited, bread and beer had been made available from the royal stores and food vendors had been quietly urged to keep their prices low for the duration of the tournament. As a result the revelry was infectiously high-spirited, with all and sundry toasting the health of the king, the Iron Legion, the knights of the Royal Army, and the Ironborn, but most fervently toasting the end of the war and the coming of peace. The exact terms of the Peace of Pentos were still only fuzzily understood by the vast majority of the populace, but they had quickly grasped that the salient point that concerned them was the termination of hostilities. For those who did understand the terms of the peace, the indignation at their injustice was tempered by the realization of their necessity. The kingdom needed peace in order to build up to a point where it could triumph in future wars. And the news Robert had brought back of Braavos’ interest in forming an alliance and the continuing benevolent neutrality of the Seven Kingdoms was extremely welcome. Already Ser Gerion and Ser Wendel Manderly were reported to be negotiating the terms not just of a loan, but of the opening of a branch of the Iron Bank in Myr.

In the Palace of Justice the mood was unabashedly effervescent. Guildsmen rubbed shoulders with knights, lords passed the salt for Legion captains, merchants chaffered over the wine and meat with priests of the Seven and the Lord of Light, the champions of the tournament were toasted and re-toasted, and at the high table Robert held court with the officers of his government and a few select members of the nobility, clergy, and burghers of the city. A coterie of musicians played a range of tunes that was already beginning to blend the chansons and ballades of Westeros with the a capella call-and-response work and field songs of the former slaves. Eventually Robert quaffed the last of his goblet, stood from his chair, walked out in front of the high table, and raised his hands for quiet, which descended gradually as the musicians wound down.
“Gentles all,” Robert said, projecting his voice across the courtyard, “we thank you all for the service you have done the realm in the late war, and for the sacrifices you have made. But thanks alone are not enough, when the service and sacrifice are deserving of more. Consequently, there are men I would reward for what they have done for the realm. Captain Akhollo, stand forward!”

After a moment extricating himself from his bench the tall Dothraki, his hair tied back in a simple braid and set with a quartet of tiny bells for Pentos, Tara, the siege, and Narrow Run, strode out in front of Robert and clapped his fist against his chest in a military salute that Robert returned gravely. “When we spoke yesterday, I asked you to choose a surname,” Robert said. “Have you chosen one?”

Akhollo lifted his chin. “I am a free man, Your Grace,” he said, only a trace of accent remaining, “and so I take the surname of Freeman.”

Robert nodded as a murmur of approval swept the room. “Then let it be so,” he said, his voice turning formal. “Akhollo Freeman, for the valor, leadership, and zeal you have shown in our service, we are minded to make you a knight of the realm. To be such a knight is a grave responsibility; by accepting it, you accept also that your life is no longer your own, but is at the service of the people you are set in authority over. To be a knight is to judge the quarrels of your people, to relieve their afflictions, to maintain the laws of the kingdom for their good, and to defend them to the last drop of your heart’s blood in the last ditch against those who would do them harm. If you fail in any of this, you will be called to account before your peers and your gods, at peril of your mortal body and your immortal soul. Knowing all this, is it your will to accept this charge and this honor?”

Akhollo blinked, his face momentarily slack in astonishment, and then squared his shoulders. “It is, Your Grace,” he said resolutely.

“Then kneel,” Robert said, and as Akhollo did so he drew his sword, raised it high, and then lowered it to rest the flat of the blade on Akhollo’s shoulder. “Be without fear in the face of the enemy,” Robert intoned, raising the blade over Akhollo’s head to lower it onto his other shoulder. “Uphold rigorously and execute faithfully the laws of the realm.” Back to the other shoulder. “Defend the least of your people as you would defend yourself and your blood.” Back to the other shoulder. “Act with honor and do no wrong. That is your oath.” Robert raised his sword to the salute and sheathed it, then brought his hand across in a backhand blow that rocked Akhollo’s head aside. “And that is so you remember it,” he said. “Rise, Ser Akhollo Freeman, and let me be the first to welcome you to the brotherhood of chivalry.”

As Ser Akhollo Freeman rose to his feet and Robert embraced him as a brother, the onlookers erupted with applause. All present knew they were witnessing history; never before had a Dothraki, or a former slave, received the accolade from an Andal king. As Akhollo, who had just been ordered to take a broken shackle for his coat of arms, walked back to his seat with a glazed look on his face, Robert was already calling the next man forward. In total, more than a hundred men, sixty of them former slaves, received the accolade that night, nor were they the only men honored.

Ser Vernan Irons and Ser Brynnan the Axe were made lords for their valor at Narrow Run, with lands near Ceralia. Victarion Greyjoy, with Dagmer Cleftjaw and Roryn Pyke at his side, received a charter to found a fortified town on the western coast and bring the land around it under cultivation as Lord Lieutenant of the new town and Warden of the Sea of Myrth; Robert announced that the least thanks he could give the Ironborn for the courage they had shown without even swearing fealty to him was to give them a home. Lord Erik Ironmaker’s hammer, he swore, would be mounted in a place of honor in the great hall of the Palace of Justice, as a monument to his valor and leadership, and a reminder to his heirs of the worth of the Ironborn; Roryn Pyke was seen to shed tears of joy at the honor done to his old lord, though he vigorously dashed them away and
clamped his jaw rigidly shut. Franlan Shipwright’s post of Lord Captain of the Port was made
hereditary in his line, with the right to receive a tithe of the harbor tolls. Ser Lyn Corbray was
ennobled as Lord Lieutenant of Sirmium, with additional fiefs around that town, and confirmed as
Warden of the South, along with his counterparts Ser Brus Buckler of Campora and the East and
Ser Richard Shermer of Ceralia and the North. Ser Mychel Egen and Ser Wendel Manderly
received lordships near Myr city, while more than two-score other knights took seisin of lordships
in the hinterlands under the terms of the Great Charter.

At last Robert, who had needed to drain two more goblets of wine over the course of the
ceremonies, cleared his throat. “Only one more matter must be settled tonight,” he declared, “and it
is one close to our hearts. Ser Gerion Lannister, stand forward. Lord Eddard Stark, stand forward.”
As the Master of Whispers and the Hand of the King stepped out from behind the high table and
stood before their king, Robert held out his hand to Eddard, who reached up, undid the brooch that
was his badge of office, and handed it over with a bow. Lowering his hand, Robert quelled the
murmurs that swept the hall with a look. “We are of the view,” he declared, “that for a king to have
only one Hand is a flawed system; after all, we have two hands.” A chuckle rippled through the
onlookers as Robert raised his plate-sized paws in illustration. “The first of these hands is that
which we present to our friends,” Robert continued, his gaze seeking out the few Braavosi in the
crowd. “The open hand of peace and commerce, the velvet glove of amity and brotherhood. For
this, we must have one who our friends may trust to speak with our words under all conditions.”
Robert turned to Ser Gerion. “Ser Gerion Lannister,” he said, “for the skill, integrity, and prudence
you have shown in your service to us, we would name you the King’s Hand, to see with our eyes,
hear with our ears, and speak with our voice to our friends and allies.”

Ser Gerion bent the knee. “I accept this office, Your Grace,” he answered, “and pledge upon my
honor and my life never to fail you and your realm.”

After Ser Gerion was raised to his feet and the gold Hand’s brooch affixed to the breast of his
doubtlet, Robert raised his hands to still the applause and cheers. “The second of our hands,” he
said, his voice darkening, “is for those who set themselves against us. We know well, friends, that
there are those in this world who would stop at naught to see this realm thrown down and
destroyed, as if it had never been.” A feral growl rose from the court in answer. “To offer the
velvet glove of friendship to such people would be an exercise in futility, for they would see it as
an admission of weakness,” Robert went on. “And so to them we must offer a different hand. To
our enemies we must extend, not the open hand in the velvet glove, but the clenched fist in the iron
gauntlet. For such an office, we must have one who we may trust to be unswerving in his devotion
to the realm and his hatred for its enemies.” Robert looked Eddard in the face. “Eddard Stark,” he
said solemnly, “for the valor, leadership, and zeal you have shown in our service, we would name
you the King’s Fist, to be the shield of our realm and people and the hammer of our enemies.”

Eddard knelt before his foster-brother. “By earth and water,” he said, his voice fervent, “by bronze
and iron, by ice and fire, I swear to be Your Grace’s man in peace and in war. I shall be a watchdog
to your people and a hunting wolf to your enemies. If I should fail in this office, then may my name
be cursed and my body rot unburied under the empty sky.” He drew the ceremonial dagger from
his belt and drew it across his palm. “This I swear,” he proclaimed as the blood welled, “with the
gods and all here as my witness.”

“So mote it be,” Robert said, raising Eddard to his feet and pinning a black iron brooch in the
shape of a clenched gauntlet to the front of his doublet. As Eddard and Gerion bowed and walked
back to their seats to applause and cheers, Robert raised his hands again. “Thus ends the business
of kingship tonight,” he declared, “and my only command now is this; drink, dance, and be merry,
for tonight we celebrate victory! Let all who love holy freedom rejoice, and let all who uphold
accursed slavery hear our revels and tremble!”
The cheers made the walls of the courtyard reverberate as the musicians struck up a foot-stomping tune and tables and benches were dragged away to clear the floor for dancing.
Beyond the Songs and Stories

Beyond the Songs and Stories

Any song would have had the story end there, with laughter and dancing and wild celebration. But songs, Robert reflected as his head twinged again, deliberately ignored the morning after. Of a certainty, they never mentioned hangovers.

Nor did they mention that even the morning after a victory celebration there was still business to do. So, as much as Robert wanted to stick his head under the pillow and close his eyes until the headache went away, he dragged himself out of bed and started on his daily work. Two hours of light exercise in the training yard and a gallon of water cut half and half with wine alleviated most of the headache, or at least enough for him to focus on his correspondence. After an hour of letters Ser Brynden, looking almost indecently fresh despite the fact that he had done as much dancing and drinking as anyone the night before, and Gerion and Ser Wendel Manderly, who at least looked a little pale, came by to review the state of the Royal Army and which companies they wanted to keep on duty and which they wanted to place on a reserve footing. Since that question would need Ned’s input they went in search of him, talking along the way about some of the broader implications of the Peace of Pentos.

Along the way they met Lyn and Jaime, who had just finished an inconclusive series of practice bouts in the training yard and were going in for luncheon. Upon hearing of the topic of conversation and the subject of the proposed meeting they fell in, with Jaime suggesting that they might as well impose on Ned’s hospitality with the promise to let him do the same to them sometime. A little further along they found Victarion, who also joined them with the claim that as long as they were discussing military matters they could talk about the navy, especially if they could send a runner for Lord Franlan.

At Ned’s quarters they were more than a little surprised to find him taking luncheon with a woman. And a rather good-looking woman, at that, Robert decided with a professional’s judgment; a fair-skinned brunette with strong cheekbones, a snub nose, and a ready smile, judging by the one she had been giving Ned when he and Ser Brynden walked in unannounced. As Ned and his companion rose from their chairs and began to kneel Robert forestalled them with a wave. “No need for formality, Ned, this isn’t a formal occasion.” He cocked an eyebrow at the woman. “Friend of yours, brother?”


For a long moment Robert didn’t believe his ears. “Your what?” he asked finally, shock robbing him of his manners.

“He asked me to marry him, Your Grace, and I said yes,” the woman said, just as bluntly as Ned had introduced her. “This morning.”

Robert’s jaw dropped as he blinked rapidly and exchanged a glance with Ser Brynden, who seemed just as shocked as he did. Gerion was also looking at Ned like a country bumpkin who had just seen a two-headed calf, while Victarion was giving the woman the same look. Jaime’s eyebrows had all but vanished under his bangs and he was opening and closing his mouth like a fish yanked out of the water; Wendel was similarly flabbergasted. Only Lyn had kept his countenance. When Robert finally regained the ability to speak the only thing he could think to say was, “Dammit Ned, I told you to find a leman, not a wife.”
Ned shrugged. “You told me to find some pretty young thing and take her to bed, Your Grace,” he said reasonably. “Those were your exact words, as I recall. You never said anything about what I should do afterwards.”

Robert opened his mouth to retort, stopped to remember exactly what he had told Ned to do when he found him in that graveyard, and eventually laughed ruefully. “You’re right, I didn’t,” he admitted. “Teach me to mind what I say.”

“Farwynd,” Ser Brynden said musingly. “Any relation to Lord Farwynd?”

“Not one worth mentioning,” Amarya replied, her accent thickening. “My father’s the proverbial poor relation, and my mother was a fisherman’s daughter. I fell in love with another fisherman who answered Lord Ironmaker’s call for men to find wealth and glory in Myrish service, and followed him onto the ships.” Her eyes glittered a moment. “He died in the sea-fight with Lord Ironmaker, and I was alone here with barely a hand of friends this side of the Narrow Sea. So when Eddard and I found each other by the docks . . .” she shrugged, conveying a world of meaning in that simple gesture.

Robert glanced at Victarion, who shrugged. “She’s a free woman, and of age,” he said. “And even if her father was likely to object, he’s back in the Isles; it’s not like we can ask his opinion on the matter. Not that he would object to his daughter marrying the foster-brother and first captain of a king.”

“When exactly did you two first meet?” Jaime asked hesitantly.

“Two days before the tournament,” Ned replied.

Jaime blinked. “Are you entirely sure you’ve thought this all the way through?” he asked even more hesitantly. “Only three days seems a bit fast to go from first meeting to betrothal.”

“Especially when one of the parties involved has no dowry and no meaningful connections to offer,” Lyn added, raising his hands at Ned and Victarion’s joint glare. “Merely a statement of fact, no offense intended.”

Eddard tipped his head to one side and back again. “Not like I have much to offer either, except for my effects and what I’ve put by from my pay from when we were in Braavosi service.”

“When which can be remedied,” Robert replied in his most definite tone of voice. “I will not have my Fist waste away for lack of a living.”

Brynden shrugged. “I don’t see much here that threatens the strength of the realm,” he said. “That said, it’s not my decision.” Wendel nodded agreement.

At Robert’s raised eyebrow Gerion also shrugged. “I agree with Brynden,” he said. “It’s not like Your Grace can use Lord Stark’s marriage as a bargaining chip, since he’s not of your house and, forgive me, not the best bait to dangle in that regard anyways, for various reasons.”

Robert saw Amarya shoot Gerion a venomous glare out of the corner of his eye and was more than a little cheered by it, especially since he also caught Eddard’s shrug. Damnit, Ned deserved someone who would take his part. He agreed with Jaime that it seemed a bit fast, but Ned was both sensible enough not to fall for a money-grubber and, for now at least, not wealthy enough to attract one.

Besides which, Robert decided as he looked at Ned and Amarya standing by each other, he could see why Ned had chosen to strike while the iron was hot, so to speak. He had thought his future
with Lyanna was secure, and then the Rapist had taken her on the eve of their fucking wedding day. The Stranger waited, as the septons put it, especially for men who lived by their swords.

_Hells take it_, he decided, _at least one of us should get some joy out of this whole affair, for however long it lasts_. He extended his hand with a smile. “Welcome to the family, Lady Amarya,” he said. “Ned, I hope you’ve got some good wine in here, because this calls for a drink.”

XXX

The young Valeman licked his lips as the city grew on the horizon. Partly in anticipation, but mostly in nervousness; the next two or three days would be the fulcrum around which the rest of his life would pivot.

It had been a long road from the Fingers to this place. He had dreamed of rising from his family’s small and hardscrabble origins to be a man equal to his foster-siblings, but time and again the door had been slammed in his face. He had been highborn enough to play with a lord’s children, but not to wed one of them. When he had attempted to win the lady’s hand by the strength of his arm, as the singers loved to tell, her brute of a betrothed had played with him like a cat with a mouse before tiring of the game and all but killing him. No sooner had his wounds closed enough to let him leave his bed than his erstwhile foster-father had sent him back to the Fingers with a warning to not come near his daughters again. Oh, how he had stewed over the injustice of it all as he healed, nursing his hate as much as his wounds, until it settled in his bones like molten iron in a mold.

In a song, he would doubtless have become a great villain, the sort of monster smallfolk women used to frighten their children into behaving. But then the rebellion happened, and all had changed.

Not that he had been reunited with his lady-love with all obstacles swept away; her betrothed had been crippled, not killed, and by all accounts they seemed to be comfortable enough with each other. His fingers clenched involuntarily on the rail at the thought of his Cat bearing the children of that glorified savage. At least the savage had been crippled, and that severely, by all accounts. He would take that much justice from the gods as a gift unlooked-for. But much else had changed, especially in these last few months after Robert the Brief had first conquered Myr, and then defended it.

In the two months since the Peace of Pentos, there had been a small flood of emigration to the new kingdom. Sellswords, freeriders, and hedge knights from across the Seven Kingdoms had marched to the ports of eastern Westeros to seek fame and fortune, many of them clubbing together and pooling their funds to buy their passage. Merchants followed them just as assiduously, either to reestablish fortunes and contacts destroyed in the Sack of Myr or else seeking out whatever new markets might be had. Begging brothers and itinerant septons were also seeking passage across the Narrow Sea, hoping to spread the worship of the Faith. Even some women were making the crossing; five of them were on this very ship. Two were the daughters of landed knights hoping to be able to boast of having a lord for a good-son, while the other three were the daughters of wealthy merchants hoping to marry into at least the chivalry, if not the nobility, on the strength of their purses.

If an iron-headed sellsword could rise to lordship in King Robert’s service, the Valeman had vowed, then so could he. What, did he not have the finest hand and the sharpest mind in the Vale? Had he not learned how to stretch the tiny rents and revenues of his familial lands to their greatest extent? He had no talent for sword-play, but give him a paper full of numbers and he could make them dance with a scrawl of his quill. And in Myr, he would not have to face the same barred doors that had forestalled his rise in Westeros.

So he had swallowed his pride, stifled his hatred for at least a little while, and written a letter.
Upon receiving the prayed-for answer, he had sold his family’s lands and tower on the Fingers, made his way down to Gulltown, and taken a steerage berth on the next ship bound for Myr. All he owned in the wide world he now carried on his person, none of it more precious than the letter that even now was tucked in his doublet. Eddard Stark’s influence in the court of Myr might be reduced, but he was still King Robert’s foster-brother. If someone came to him bearing a letter of recommendation signed by his brother and good-sister, then much could be made possible. And if Stark was unamenable, then surely the Blackfish would remember the boy who had come to him for advice about his childhood troubles. If nothing else, the Royal Army would surely need a good clerk.

Perhaps he couldn’t forge a kingdom for himself by the strength of his arms, but he could still leave his mark on the Kingdom of Myr. Petyr Baelish smiled in anticipation as the stink of Myr’s harbor began to fill his nostrils. It smelled like opportunity.
The High Septon concealed his anger; he had long suspected Mateo of angling for the crystal crown and that little speech only added to the evidence, in his mind. The former archsepton of Dorne was as ambitious as any child of that desert realm, and all the more dangerous for having been civilized. Not while I draw breath, old man. “Does anyone truly believe that I did not act as seemed best at the time?” he asked in his most reasonable tone of voice. “Jaspar may have proved inept, but we all had every reason to expect great things of him from his record at seminary, and Ser Leofric was well-known to be a good son of the Faith. Will any here deny this?”

Put like that, even Hugar and Mateo had to shake their heads; to do otherwise would have meant directly challenging the High Septon’s fitness to lead the Faithful, and neither of them was powerful enough to take that step. Nor would they be, while Tywin Lannister remained content to rest on his laurels and Dorne was still recovering from the Red Viper Rebellion. “In any case,” the High Septon continued, “Jaspar did an admirable job of compiling the evidence against Jonothor.” He tapped the papers in front of him, a fair copy of which rested before every member of the Most Devout present in a testament to the number of scribes the Great Sept could bring to bear and the fact that each of the Most Devout could read. And very well, at that; Mateo, for one, wrote devotional poetry not just in Common Tongue and the High Andalic that was the official language of the Faith, but in Rhoynish. He thought it was a closely guarded secret, but the High Septon had suborned his secretary some time ago. “Does anyone doubt that we have sufficient evidence before us to convict Jonothor of heresy?”

Again, there were only shaking heads. “His commission of non-Faithful dead to the care of the Seven would be evidence enough,” said Payten, “but his other offenses compound his guilt. To
“Personally, I find his last words to Jaspar to be most interesting,” said Most Devout Donnal. “Firstly, his claim to have resurrected the Faith Militant. Leaving aside the fact that it provides that much more rope to hang him with, can any of us deny that his words have a kernel of truth in them?”

Payten shook his head. “The Faith Militant can only be composed of the Faithful,” he said pedantically. “To claim otherwise is just as heretical as his primary offense.”

Most Devout Justan flipped through the pages before him. “For my part, I find his argument interesting, as Donnal said,” he replied. “Even if nine in ten of this ‘Faith Militant’, so called, are not of the Faith, the fact remains that they fight under the command of Faithful knights, sworn to a Faithful king, in a cause the Seven approve of. It is not the Swords and Stars reborn, but it is a step further in that direction than any that has been taken since the time of the Conciliator.”

The other Most Devout glanced at each other. Donnal and Justan both came from the Snowy Sept, which had an ambiguous reputation in the Faith. On the one hand, it was lauded for its defense and propagation of the Faith in the teeth of one of the last great strongholds of paganism in Westeros; it was for this reason that at least one or two of the Most Devout tended to be veterans of the place. On the other hand, there was always the sneaking suspicion that the Northern Faith was not quite as doctrinally or as practically pure as it should be. It was a fair way from the supervision of any other sept, after all, with potentially unfriendly pagans on every side. That sort of thing was almost bound to lead to compromise; or corruption, if you weren’t feeling charitable.

Not that anyone had ever been able to prove anything. “You said firstly,” Payten said, “which implies that there is at least one other reason. If you would enlighten us?”

“That Jonothor claimed to have been under orders to not return here to confront us,” Donnal said, leaning forward in his chair. “And also that he specifically advised that we send someone who would not incur the wrath of at least Eddard Stark. I submit, friends, that we must consider not only how to deal with Jonothor, but how to deal with the Kingdom of Myr if they persist in offering him sanctuary in defiance of His Holiness.”

“They would not dare,” Hugar claimed. “Not when we can excommunicate everyone who follows the heretic and place the kingdom under interdict.”

“The last time someone told Robert Baratheon he couldn’t do something, he abdicated the Iron Throne and did it anyway,” Justan replied. “I agree with Donnal on this one, friends. If we wish to pursue this matter, then we must plan for all the potential outcomes.”

Silence fell around the table. It had been long and long since the Faith was seriously threatened with schism; the last such scare, two hundred years before the Conquest, had been resolved by the Council of Stoney Sept, which had effectively set the seal on almost half a millennium’s steady codification of the Faith’s doctrines and practices across the boundaries of the individual kingdoms. But the old enmities that had previously existed in the Faith had been bloody, and the chronicles of the old wars of Faithful against Faithful made for chilling reading.

“In that case,” Septon Mateo said slowly, “it may be best to tread softly on this matter for the moment. Excommunicate Jonothor, by all means, but do not extend the punishment to those who associate with him. Simply remind them of their duty as sons of the Faith to heed the commands of His Holiness.”

Septon Koryn leaned forward. “And if they refuse to denounce him?” he asked. “I am told that the
vast majority of the Faithful of Myr are Essosi; former slaves whom Jonothor converted himself. That is not a bond easily broken.”

The High Septon raised a finger. “Then we employ other means of exerting pressure,” he replied. “We publicize the fact of Jonothor’s heresy, and warn the Faithful that to serve the realm that gives him shelter imperils their souls as abettors of heresy. We suggest to His Grace that it would be a godly deed to restrain or even forbid commerce and emigration to Myr until Jonothor is delivered to us for trial. For our own dealings with the Kingdom of Myr,” he spread his hands. “Complete silence. Refuse even to speak to them until they deliver Jonothor to the Great Sept in chains. We do not preach in favor of their crusade, which is in fact illegal since we have not declared it ourselves, we do not send more septons to minister to the Faithful, we do not fund the construction of septries or motherhouses in the Kingdom of Myr, we do not advance them loans from our revenues, we do not do anything.”

Koryn gestured assent as a murmur of agreement swept around the table; the Reachman had been elevated to the Most Devout as a reward for long service at the Starry Sept, rather than because he had any ambitions to high office, and he tended to indecision in the absence of someone else presenting a plan.

“All of which,” Payten said reflectively, “may be unnecessary.” At the inquiring looks he went on. “I was one of Jonothor’s teachers at seminary, and unless he’s changed more than most men do, he’ll be much as he was then; stiff as a short plank and about as capable of compromise. Let him try and change Robert Baratheon from a wine-bibbing lecher to an upright and morally correct son of the Faith for a few months and Robert will send him to us himself, if only to have done with the lectures.”

“You think Jonothor will truly bite the hand that shields him?” Donnal asked, his voice skeptical. “I’ve never met the man, but I have heard that he’s quite intelligent.”

Payten shook his head. “Jonothor can no more condone moral laxness than he can flap his arms and fly,” he said confidently. “The number of times he dragged his fellow students out of the Peach by the scruff of the neck, haranguing them all the way up to the seminary doors . . .” He shook his head with a reminiscent smile on his face. “One time,” he went on, a chuckle entering his voice, “the man went after a trio of students and managed to drag them all back up the seminary, with one in each hand and driving the third before him with kicks to the posterior, berating them at full volume about the sin of lust the whole while . . .” Payten dissolved into shortles at the evidently happy memory, with a few of the other Most Devout chuckling along at the mental image thus inspired. “No,” Payten said, wiping away tears as he finally got himself under control. “He’ll force Robert to behave according to the Seven-Pointed Star or break himself in the attempt.”

The High Septon nodded. “Doubtless,” he said, “but nonetheless we shall proceed with our other means of exerting pressure on the Kingdom of Myr. The gods help best those who help themselves, after all.” The platitude won a wave of nods; no one knew that better than the Faith. The gods had their plans for each living soul and worked their will in the world as they pleased, but sometimes they needed a little help here and there.

XXX

Donys Rahtheon was not a man of his hands, but of his mind.

To be sure he had done manual work in the past, rebuilding his family’s fortunes from the genteel poverty that his father and grandfather had wasteredl them into, but that had been in the early days of his manhood, when it had been necessary to go along on the ships himself to make sure the captains didn’t defraud them. Those had been hard days and harder nights, sleeping with one hand
on a sheathed dagger under the pillow in case this was the night that some captain who had grown too used to taking more than his share tried to knock him over the head and drop him overboard with a length of chain around his ankles. Thankfully, he had not needed to do such things since the year before he married; after that, he had had people to do that for him, leaving him free to pursue his true calling.

For Donys Rahtheon was a man who could take vastly disparate pieces of information, connect them to each other, and draw the lines that made a picture. From his study in Myr he had been able to take the news that the price of Pentoshi wheat had gone up, a rumor of heavy rains and flooding along the Trident, and a report that the Tyrells were having difficulty with their bannermen again, and come to the conclusion that an enterprising man with connections to the farms of the hinterlands could make a killing selling grain to Braavos that year. He had done so on two memorable occasions, both of which had been immensely profitable years with the added attraction of being able to gouge the hated and feared Braavosi.

If he was working from the upper-floor office of a warehouse on the Volantene waterfront instead of a manse in the magister’s quarter of Myr, these days, and if his circle of agents, contacts, and friends-of-friends was somewhat reduced from its previous expanse, the rules and methods of the game hadn’t changed. The stakes, though, those had changed even more dramatically than his circumstances.

By the calculus of fate and availability, he had become the treasurer, quartermaster, purser, and spymaster to House Targaryen-in-exile. It was his agents that provided them with information, his accounts and monies that fed and clothed and housed them, and his ships that carried the commerce that was their lifeblood. He had no skill with a sword and he could not command an army, but he could certainly keep everyone out of penury, especially since he was essentially left to do what he did best.

That was part of the deal that he, Ser Arthur, and Ser Barristan had come to, once they had all recovered from the shock of Marq Grafton’s and . . . her (Donys firmly pushed the memory of his daughter’s name out of his mind; he had no daughter, now) betrayal. Ser Barristan had taken responsibility for Viserys and Visenya’s personal protection, Ser Arthur had taken command of the exiles (the Company of the Dragon, as they called themselves now), and Donys had taken charge of everything else. Ser Gyles Rambton, murdered by the deserters along with a dozen others from the fleet who had refused to be forsworn, had been buried with the honors due to brave men. Viserys’ education had been taken in hand, with Ser Barristan seeing to the boy’s martial training and Donys finding a half-maester for his other studies. Some hurried negotiations had seen the Company taken on a long-term contract with the Triarchs, with the stipulations that they be allowed to recruit locally to fill their ranks and that Donys’ warehouses and other properties within the city be considered extraterritorial possessions of House Targaryen. Shortly afterward, their ranks padded out with the sweepings of the Volantene gaols and a few freeborn citizens desperate or mad enough to sign on, the Company had been sent east with orders to devastate the western lands of Matarys; evidently that city had done something to earn the ire of the Triarchs.

That, Donys reflected, had been quite foolish of them. Volantis was easily the strongest of the Free Cities on land, and the only one besides Braavos that had an entrenched martial tradition. The tigers of Volantis were the nearest equivalent Essos had to Westerosi knights, although they historically fought as charioteers or infantrymen, rather than as armored lancers. Under ordinary circumstances, that adherence to the martial traditions of the Freehold had been a handicap, being seen as an anachronism that wasn’t quite gentlemanly, but these were hardly ordinary times. The fall of Myr to the Sunset Company and the subsequent rise of the Kingdom of Myr had given the tigers their finest opportunity since the Century of Blood; the study of war was not some outdated anachronism, anymore, but a dire necessity. The wolves were on their doorstep, their orators cried,
and if they did not take arms and strike, remembering the ways of their ancestors who of old had conquered Essos, then the fate of Myr would befall Volantis.

The resulting fervor had infected even the elephants; predictably so, in Donys’ opinion. An elephant might be bulky, slow, and easy-going, but they were as dangerous as tigers were; he had once seen an elephant goaded beyond endurance turn its mahout into a red smear. The Kingdom of Myr hadn’t struck at Volantis directly, yet, but the mere fact of their existence could not be tolerated. Not when Volantis’ slaves outnumbered its citizens by five to one, and Robert Baratheon had sworn to wage war without mercy on slavery.

Already two plots by the slaves to revolt that Donys knew of had been uncovered and crushed with ruthless butchery, those ringleaders taken alive being publicly executed in inventively gruesome ways and their heads mounted on pikes along the Long Bridge. The Red Temple, he knew, was closely watched by Triarchal spies, in answer to which the Fiery Hand seemed to be on edge and even more zealous in their duties than they normally were. At least four of the tiger cloaks’ officers had been posted to the frontier ahead of the regular schedule of rotations. Donys could read the signs as if they were writ in letters of fire; Volantis was standing on the lip of the volcano.

Fortunately, the Triarchs appeared to have come to the same conclusion, and were taking appropriate measures. The Golden Company had also been retained on a generous long-term contract, as had several lesser companies. The tigers had started a citizen’s militia, with a company based in each ward of the city, and Triarchal agents had been dispatched to Astapor to buy as many Unsullied as the Good Masters would sell. Every blacksmith in the city who could forge weapons was now required to forge a set number of spear-heads and sword-blades every month, depending on the size of their shop, to be bought at a fixed price by the city to arm their new forces.

Donys smiled thinly. The Kingdom of Myr, he judged, was almost certainly biting off rather more than it could chew. Their victory at Narrow Run, and the treachery that had ensured it, would make them enemies of the Dothraki nation. Tyrosh and Lys were rearming themselves to meet the threat that had so suddenly arisen. But most of all, the First Daughter of Valyria was rousing itself to anger. Even if Viserys never again set foot in Westeros, a fate that seemed increasingly likely to Donys, though he never said so where Ser Arthur could hear him, the odds that he would be able to take revenge on Robert and Eddard for his family’s exile and his brother’s death were improving by the day. Especially since Viserys was proving himself to be a determined student; he would not, he had explained with a child’s seriousness, allow his sister Visenya to come to harm at anyone’s hands, especially not those of Robert Dragonsbane and his dog. The fact that he had just turned ten and barely came up to a grown man’s elbow had not seemed to matter to him.

Donys’ smile broadened as he contemplated the future. From the darkness of three months ago, it seemed considerably brighter.

XXX

To My Lord Tywin Lannister, health, prosperity, and the blessings of the gods.

The situation in the city remains unchanged from my previous letter. The prosperity engendered by the end of the late war has silenced any dissent against the king, so that the only unrest that remains is the muttering of malcontents and broken men who can never be satisfied. The retraining of the royal fleet proceeds apace; Lord Redwyne reports that the whole fleet should be ready to go on campaign within a month of the new year. The news from Dorne is uniformly good; with the recent hounding into exile of Ser Garin Uller, the last leader of the rebel-brigands of any name, Princess-Regent Mellario, the other members of the regency council, and the Royal Order of the Sun seem to have matters well in hand.
I have the pleasure to report that Her Grace your daughter is again increasing, and swears that she will present another son to His Grace. Aside from the usual discomforts attendant upon such a condition she seems untroubled by it, and given her previous success in this field and the good health she continues in I believe that she has but little to fear from a second confinement. I shall, of course, undertake every effort to ensure a happy ending for all concerned. Your grandson Prince Lyonel is a vigorous child, already toddling and babbling; his recent learning of the word ‘no’ was cause for much consternation among his nurses.

His Grace the king also continues in good health and vigor, and his reign continues to wax mightily. The success of the Peace of Pentos and the prosperity it has engendered has strengthened his rule and won him the hearts of the people of this city to an extent that I have not seen since My Lord was Hand. He has directed me to draw up plans for the extension of the crownroads through the Riverlands and the Stormlands and the replacement of the Dragonpit with a Guildhall and public garden, which last has already proven such a popular notion with the aldermen and burghers of the city that they have voted to contribute funds toward the cost of the endeavor.

The only difficulty currently facing their Graces is the new lady-in-waiting; Lady Praela has a sharp tongue and is not afraid to use it on anyone who crosses her. Her Grace your daughter, for her part, returns word for word with a will, especially when her condition makes her short of temper. His Grace has commanded them to be civil to each other in his presence and they obey, but when he leaves the room the war is resumed as fervently as ever. I have given instructions that Lady Praela be watched most carefully to ensure that she does not go beyond words to some more drastic means and advised your daughter not to accept food or drink from her, to which she replied with no small amount of acerbity that she would do as she pleased, damn my eyes. I fear that I spoke to her while her pregnancy was making her dyspeptic. My vigilance in this matter shall, of course, continue unflaggingly.

As far as His Grace’s thoughts on any future contentions in the Disputed Lands and the southern Narrow Sea are concerned, I have no new information. That said, His Grace spends much time closeted with Lord Redwyne and has requested that I provide an accurate and up-to-date map of the Stepstones as soon as I may. I must therefore conclude that His Grace intends to take a hand in any future conflict in that quarter of the world, presumably in alliance with the Braavosi. I shall provide more information as it is disclosed to me.

I remain, in the meantime, My Lord’s most humble and obedient servant,

Pycelle, Grand Maester.
While the slaver cities were arming themselves, the small council of the Kingdom of Myr was taking stock of their own situation. On the one hand, this situation was relatively sound; in addition to the Royal Army and the Royal Navy, the Kingdom could reasonably expect Braavos and the Seven Kingdoms to come to their aid if Lys or Tyrosh attacked first. Braavos’ land forces were still stretched covering Braavos and Pentos, supporting Norvos against a newly belligerent Qohor, and protecting Braavosi ships all around the world, but the Braavosian fleet was the strongest in the Narrow Sea, if not the world. And what the Braavosi potentially lacked in soldiers could be more than made up for by the forces of the Seven Kingdoms, for King Stannis had not confined his pioneering improvements solely to Westeros’ infrastructure.

On the other hand, the situation that the Kingdom of Myr faced was dire. Although their northern frontier was relatively secure thanks to the Braavosi alliance, they were otherwise surrounded by enemies, who if they managed to coordinate their attacks could submerge them beneath a tide of foes. Fortunately, the Kingdom of Myr only really had to face two enemies at once, instead of three or four; distance and the realities of logistics largely prevented Volantis from quickly intervening in an overland war, while the disunity of the Dothraki and the distance between Myr and the Dothraki Sea meant that the Dothraki would only pose an intermittent threat, if a serious one.

This, however, still left the Kingdom of Myr facing two-to-one odds, for late in 286 Tyrosh and Lys signed a treaty committing themselves to a military alliance against the Kingdom of Myr under any and all circumstances. Faced with this problem, the Kingdom of Myr had two potential solutions; stand on the defensive in the next war, or attack. The defensive option was quickly discarded; the Kingdom of Myr didn’t have the resources to win a long war of attrition. It being decided to attack, the target of the attack was quickly chosen as Tyrosh; between that city and Lys, Tyrosh was closer, more immediately threatening, and had incurred more grudges on the part of the Kingdom of Myr thanks to their harboring of the Myrish exiles and their leading role in the First Slave War.

With the target of the offensive chosen, the council turned to discussing ways and means . . .

Eddard frowned at the map that had been hung on the wall of the small council chamber. “The way I read that map,” he said slowly, “Tyrosh has five major towns that we have to reduce. Of those, the toughest nuts to crack will be these ones.” He traced a finger over Lissus, Aesica, and Brivas. “The fact that they’re seaport towns means that the Tyroshi will be able to rush in reinforcements and supplies without too much difficulty.” He turned to Victarion. “Unless the Royal Fleet can blockade them?”

Victarion made a face. “Not easily,” he admitted. “Once the new ships are built and their crews trained, we should be able to blockade one of those ports, but not two and certainly not all three. We will be able to launch raids which should interdict at least some ships, but we won’t be able to close off more than one port completely at any one time.”

Eddard nodded. “So we’ll have to hold off on attack those three towns for the moment, and focus on the other two.” He pointed towards the first one, a sennight’s march west of the borderlands. “Of those, Alalia is the one we’ll have to take first, if only because it’s closer to the border. Sinuessa’s on it’s far side, and we can’t risk leaving a major fortified town in our rear.”

Gerion nodded. “And the Tyroshi know it,” he said. “The Tyroshi Conclave has voted funds to
improve the fortifications and increase the garrison there, and the Archon has ordered that non-
essential slaves be sent out of the town, in order to make it easier to police them. Judging from the
information I have, we should expect to face at least a thousand soldiers, both Tyroshi regulars and
sellswords, and maybe twice as many militia. That, in addition to any forces we drive into the town
and the Tyroshi field army."

“Against which,” Brynden said, tapping the sheaf of papers before him, “we can muster maybe ten
companies of the Legion and four companies of cavalry for an attack into Tyroshi territory,
assuming at least eight days’ notice.”

There were nods around the table. The system on which the Royal Army had been organized was
twofold. Firstly, there were the standing forces, one Legion company and one cavalry company
stationed in Myr and an equal force in the three major towns; these would be full-time warriors
drawing monthly pay from the royal treasury. The rest of the Iron Legion would spend the majority
of their time either farming or practicing a trade and assembling to train as a full company for eight
days a month and three full sennights a year in order to keep their skills sharp; each man was
expected to train with their personal weapons on their own time. The cavalry companies, being
composed of the nobility and chivalry of the realm and their principal henchmen, were expected to
assemble and train as a full company for at least one full sennight every month in addition to their
individual training. Both Legion men and cavalymen were expected to find their own keep when
they weren’t training or on Royal service, and in order to draw their monthly training stipend they
had to attend and complete their required training to the satisfaction of the royal inspectors. It was
a setup designed to maintain a sizable and well-trained reserve while balancing the cost to the
Treasury against the thousand and one other commitments that absolutely needed to be funded, but
the downside was that the number of soldiers that could be immediately put in the field in case of
emergency was limited. In order to assemble an army large enough to go a-conquering, advance
notice was required in order to allow the reserve companies to assemble and march to the
designated muster point.

“How large can we expect the Tyroshi field army to be?” Eddard asked.

Gerion flipped through his notes for a brief moment. “Perhaps two thousand sellsword cavalry and
ten thousand infantry, most of which will be men of the Archon’s new militia,” he answered.
“More or less our numbers.”

Each company of the Iron Legion was a thousand strong, with three spearmen for every
crossbowman. Each cavalry company was set at a hundred lances, with each lance consisting of a
knight or man-at-arms, his squire, a valet who could serve as a heavy infantryman, an archer, and a
page; the formula had originated in either the Reach or the Vale, depending on who you asked,
several hundred years before the Conquest and had continued in use with only minor changes ever
since.

“These new militia, will they be able to stand against us?” Victarion asked, clearly skeptical.
“These are tradesmen and idle aristos for the most part, I understand, not warriors.”

Gerion shrugged. “The Myrish militiamen fought well enough,” he pointed out, “and quite a few of
the Myrish exiles, I am told, have taken service in the Tyroshi militia. As for the Tyroshi
themselves,” he spread his hands. “Only the worst of men will not fight to the death to protect his
home and his family and the temples of his gods. The sellswords may be easy pickings or not, as
the case may be, but we should expect the Tyroshi infantry to fight hard, if not well.”

“Especially given that a fair proportion of them will be regular soldiers, men who have been in
harness for years already,” Brynden added. “According to Ser Lyn’s reports from the Great Raid
and the reports from the coastal fighting they’re stubborn enough.”

Victarion gestured concession as Eddard sat back down in his chair. “Then we will simply have to be better,” the King’s Fist said definitively. “Ser Brynden and I have already worked out a training program that should put us comfortably ahead of both Tyrosh and Lys in military proficiency, both in battle and on the march.” Wendel winced; training was expensive, both in pay to the men doing the training and in the equipment that they inevitably broke or wore out in the process. Eddard drove on. “Another of the deciding factors will be speed; we will need to defeat the Tyroshi quickly in order to prevent the Lyseni from coming to their aid. Ser Brynden, how fast can we have our attacking force over the border under normal conditions?”

Brynden looked up at the ceiling, the fingers of his left hand twitching as he calculated. “Eight days to complete the call-up of the necessary units,” he said finally, “and then seventeen days afterward to march from here to the border at best speed, picking up units along the way. Allowing a margin for unforeseen obstacles,” he made a face, “twenty to twenty-five days.”

The men around the table grimaced. It was a simple fact that armies were slow, especially when the fastest way to transport the necessary supplies in the amounts required was by horse or ox-drawn wagon; such vehicles did well to make ten miles a day. But in a contest where victory and defeat would be decided in a matter of days, that lack of speed was dangerous.

“Ned, work with Ser Brynden to find ways to reduce that time,” Robert said. “Wendel, join in with them to work out which options can be done best at a minimum of cost. Anything else today?” At the round of negatives, Robert nodded. “Very well then, meeting adjourned. Ned, remain a moment.” As the other small council members filed out Robert sipped from the mug of smallbeer before him and looked over his foster-brother. “All going well with your wife, Ned?”

“Very much so, Your Grace,” Eddard said, smiling in unconscious reminiscence at how he and Amarya had passed the previous evening and part of that morning. “Not just in bed, either,” he continued, ignoring Robert’s snickers. “She’s done well at taking on a lady’s duties, even if my household is a small one still.” Not that it would stay small for long; Eddard had let the word out two days ago that he was looking for new retainers and already his steward was being flooded with men putting their names forward. It seemed that, far from being warned off by the stories of Narrow Run, the fighting men of the kingdom were considering Eddard’s retinue to be a post of high honor to be hotly sought after. And not just among Northmen, but the freedmen as well; Ser Akhollo had already sent his regrets that his post as a Legion captain prevented him from taking service with a lord’s household and hinting broadly that if Eddard offered him a place he would resign his commission.

“Good, good,” Robert said absently, fiddling with his mug while Eddard cocked an eyebrow; he had known Robert since they were both only ten years of age and in all that time he had only seen him hesitate once or twice. “If I might ask, how did you go about asking her to marry you?” he said finally.

Eddard, taken aback, shrugged. “I just asked her,” he replied. “We were in bed, we had just finished, well,” he resolutely ignored Robert’s chuckle, “and I was looking at her and thinking that of all the women in the world this was the only one I could see myself spending the rest of my days with and the question just slipped out.” His mouth quirked in a half-smile. “Fortunately she said yes, or I’d have felt bloody silly.” As Robert guffawed he cocked an eyebrow. “Out of curiosity, why do you ask?”

Robert sobered immediately. “Alaesa’s pregnant,” he said. “I’m considering asking her to marry me.”
Eddard sat back, stunned. “I see,” he said finally. Then, hesitantly, “Robert, are you looking for my advice as your foster-brother or as your Fist?”

Robert shrugged. “Either,” he said. “Both, if you want.”

Eddard nodded. “As your foster-brother, then,” he said, “I say do so and best of luck to you. I doubt Lyanna would want you to let all your children be bastards.” Robert barked a laugh and gestured agreement. “As your Fist, on the other hand,” Eddard went on, “I would ask you to consider whether marrying Alaesa is the best thing you can do to strengthen your kingdom. Marrying her would certainly bind the freedmen to us with bands of iron, but we have their loyalty already and until we conquer Tyrosh and Lys, we will not be acquiring more except by natural increase.” Left unspoken was the assumption that they would conquer Tyrosh and Lys, but Robert already knew his foster-brother’s views on the necessity of the conquest of the slaver cities. “Marrying a lady from the Seven Kingdoms, on the other hand,” Eddard plowed on, “or a lady of Braavos, would gain us the strength of her House and any alliances they might have, in addition to allowing for an heir that might find more favor among the Andal nobility.”

The two foster-brothers exchanged a look. The loyalty of the nobility, both Andal and Essosi, to Robert, personally, was beyond question. How loyal they would be to his heir was potentially open to debate; the Essosi nobility would almost certainly accept Robert’s heir under any circumstances barring the egregious, but the Andal nobility might look askance on an heir whose mother had been born a slave. That potential dissatisfaction might or might not prove the root of disloyalty, but wisdom militated against taking that chance.

Especially since, given that Robert would almost certainly be leading the attack into Tyrosh when the next war came, there was at least some chance that he would die. Robert was one of the mightiest warriors alive, but even the Dragonknight had met his match eventually. And crossbow bolts didn’t care how good you were if they managed to get through your armor. Knights tended towards a certain fatalism for that very reason. If Robert were to die and leave behind an underage heir who wasn’t entirely accepted by the nobility and wouldn’t have the chance to prove himself for some years . . .

“Woe to thee, o land, when thy king is a child,” Robert said, to which Eddard nodded; the quote was from the Book of the Crone, but the faith of the old gods had a similar saying. “I will think on this,” Robert went on, “and ask Gerion’s counsel as well. Thank you, Ned.”

XXX

Maester Gordon slapped the imaginary dust of his hands and nodded. “Not bad,” he said approvingly. “Not half bad at all.”

Beside him Lord Captain of the Port Franlan Shipwright added his own nod. The object of their approval was the towers that sat at the ends of the two moles protecting Myr harbor. The original towers, glorified guardhouses really, had been worn down by the continuous assault of wind and wave, combined with official neglect; during the old wars the Quarrelsome Daughters had almost never attacked each other directly. And even if they had, their fleets would have seen off any such attack handily enough, so there had been no incentive to heavily fortify their harbors.

The Kingdom of Myr, however, couldn’t take that risk. Their fleet had maintained its honor in the war, but even protecting Myr city had taken almost all of their ships. Moreover, the Royal Fleet was actually shrinking; almost a sixth of the Ironborn were sailing back to the Isles to either inherit or enjoy their newfound wealth, most notably Harras Harlaw. So, it had been decided by the small council that each port in the Kingdom would be required to be able to defend itself, thereby freeing up the Fleet to contest the seas. In Myr city, that defense had taken the form of two heavy
springalds in each of the two towers on the landward ends of the harbor moles and the two new towers. These towers, Tygett’s Tower to the west and Leofric’s Tower to the east, were horseshoe-shaped constructions of stone some ten feet tall with walls five feet thick, and housed three heavy springalds on their single level of battlements, their handlers, and a score of crossbowmen each. The causeways atop the moles running out to them had been reinforced with an uncrenellated wall as tall as a man facing the sea, and plans were in hand to add a harbor chain to the setup when the funds were available.

Which, with any luck at all, would be soon, given the reason why so much effort had been spent on fortifying the harbor. With the cessation of the war, trade had come flooding into Myr like a tidal wave, so that the harbor was filled with ships. Braavos, King’s Landing, Gulltown, Planky Town, White Harbor, Saltpans, Maidenpool, and Oldtown all seemed to have an insatiable appetite for Myrish glassware, carpets, and lace, and the Glassblower’s Guild and the Weaver’s Guild, now composed entirely of freedmen working for wages, had risen to the challenge magnificently. As the head of the Weaver’s Guild had explained, there was a world of difference between being forced to work for the profit of people who didn’t deserve your labor, and working for your own profit at a trade that you could take pride in. The Crossbowmaker’s Guild had also seen business pick up; Stannis of Westeros had ordered a hundred crossbows as a trial, with the option to expand the order to as many as five thousand. A similar order from Braavos had driven the Crossbowmaker’s Guild to expand its workforce by almost half again in order to meet the foreign orders while keeping up with domestic demand. The Ironborn, those that could be spared from training the freedmen who had volunteered for the Royal Fleet and the construction of the new town of Ironhold down the western coast, were making a pretty penny both from carrying cargos in their own holds and by contracting out as escorts; the end of the war hadn’t put a stop to piracy.

All of this was fueled by the expansion of the Iron Bank into Myr. Vito Nestoris, who had recently been declared the Iron Bank’s agent-in-residence for Myr, had recently drawn up an instrument with Ser Wendel Manderly whereby the Iron Bank had been declared the Kingdom of Myr’s lender of last resort; that document, which had amounted to the Iron Bank underwriting the exchequer of the Kingdom of Myr, had made previously skeptical traders, moneylenders, and other merchants much more confident that the Myrish guilds would be able to deliver the goods. The fact that the Iron Bank had explicitly guaranteed only the royal government and not the guilds was, it was widely agreed, not strictly relevant. Without the guilds driving the flow of money, the royal government would quickly become insolvent, the surplus of the produce grown in the hinterland would rot in the fields for lack of paying customers in the city and abroad, and the whole economy of the kingdom would grind to a halt. If the guilds failed, then the royal government would be all but forced to prop them up. And their ability to do that had just been guaranteed by the Iron Bank.

“I mislike this dependence on the Braavosi,” grumbled Franlan, who had evidently been following Gordon’s train of thought. “We saw much of them in Myr before the siege, as traders, and their First Law did not seem to prevent their making a profit off the work of slaves, so long as those slaves were in a foreign land.” He glowered at an otherwise inoffensive Braavosi ship in the act of exiting the harbor. “But I suppose that we must work with the tools that come to our hands.”

“And the Braavosi have the potential to be a very fine tool indeed,” Gordon agreed. “We haven’t had to ask them for a loan yet, or so I hear, so that source of income should be ready to hand if we need it.” He made a face. “Which we almost certainly will, if we are to complete the fortification program in a timely fashion.” Myr city wasn’t the only place that required improvements to its defensive capabilities. Every town on the coast was required by the Crown to have a stone wall and at least two towers, one overlooking the main gate and the other protecting the harbor mouth, if they had one. Every village was required to have a wall encircling the main cluster of homes and shops. The three main towns of Ceralia, Sirmium, and Campora were already walled, so the only requirement that had been laid on them was to ‘make any repairs or improvements that the King’s
Fist shall deem necessary and proper.’

All of this had to be paid for with a river of gold. Fortifications were expensive, enough so that the erecting of castles was beyond the reach even of most lords. As a result, when Gordon had been given the task of designing the fortified places of the realm, he had opted for simplicity. A ditch ten feet deep would provide a significant obstacle for a formed body of attackers, especially when the earth that had been excavated to form the ditch was piled up along the inner perimeter of that ditch to form a rampart. Where stone was unavailable or prohibitively expensive, a palisade of stakes would provide the parapet, and the towers would also be made out of rammed earth and wood.

Even with these cost-saving measures, however, the fortification of the realm would take up a significant portion of the Crown’s revenue, most of which would come from the various tolls and fees generated by Myr’s harbor. Hence the importance placed on protecting that vital district. He had seen his father work on enough large and complicated projects to know that some damned thing always went wrong, or took too long, or cost more than advertised, or broke on first use and needed replacing at the last moment, invariably requiring more money to correct the problem. And for now, the biggest money maker available to the realm was Myr harbor.

“You’ll be off down the coast next?” Franlan asked, raising an eyebrow.

Gordon nodded. “First to Ironhold, to help Lord Greyjoy get things in proper order,” he replied. “Then down the coast to Celsa, Navio, and Cillium to make sure they’re up to regulation. Then back inland, to make a tour of the hinterland with my Pioneers and help the villagers get themselves in shape.” He shrugged. “Which could take anywhere from several months to a year or more. Has to be done though.”

Franlan nodded. “To borrow from Lord Stark, wars are coming,” he rumbled.
Oaths

Robert was just finishing his correspondence for the day when his secretary, a former scribe-slave named Maran, opened the door. “Your Grace,” he said in his soft and slightly timid voice, “Septon Jonothor requests a moment of your time.”

Robert’s brows beetled in a pensive frown as he returned his quill to its inkpot. “By all means,” he said, “send him in.” He hadn’t expected a visit from Jonothor, but he could always make time for the man who had put the crown on his head. Especially since he didn’t make a habit of requesting audiences for frivolous reasons.

When Jonothor came in Robert’s frown deepened; he had never seen the septon so out of sorts. Jonothor’s severe, angular face was drawn and his jaw clenched, like a man trying to hold back vomit. His hands had picked up a slight tremble from somewhere, and he walked with the slow, deliberate gait of a man holding onto his self-control by his fingernails. As Jonothor bowed Robert waved impatiently. “Sit down, man, sit,” he insisted, gesturing at the chair on the other side of his desk. “No need for formality, we’re not in court.”

Which was true; Robert’s solar was one of the larger rooms in the royal suite, but it was still meant as an informal reception room as much as a workplace. Aside from the desk with its pair of chairs, there were a few other chairs and a low table with parchment, quills, and ink by the fireplace, a sideboard with a selection of good wines, and a small kettle for mulling them when winter came. Which, the gods willing, would not be for some years yet; Robert was unsure as to how well the Kingdom of Myr could withstand a winter without at least a year or two of peace beforehand to prepare for it. “Drink for you?” Robert asked, gesturing at the sideboard. “You look like you could do with one.

“No, thank you Your Grace,” Jonothor said hoarsely. “I have come to inform you that I will be sailing for King’s Landing on the morning tide. I am summoned to the Great Sept of Baelor.”

Robert blinked. “Forgive me,” he said, “but I was under the impression that you had been sent here with us specifically because the Great Sept wanted you out of their sight. What do they want you back for?”

Jonothor reached into his cassock and drew out a scroll. “This,” he replied, handing over the scroll with a slight rustle as his hand trembled involuntarily, “will explain.”

Robert accepted the scroll, unrolling it to find a bull fixed with the seal of the High Septon. As he laboriously read through the flowery High Andalic of the bull, his frown deepened and deepened, so that by the time he reached the end he wore a scowl like a wrathful pagan deity. “What in the bowels of the Hells are they on?” he asked in a growl. “After that mess with Jaspar, I know you don’t exactly see eye to eye with the High Septon and the Most Devout, but you’re not a heretic!” Catching himself, he cocked an eyebrow. “Are you?”

Jonothor shrugged. “It is true that I have gone beyond the bounds of canon law,” he admitted, “but always in a fashion that I believe to be consistent with the teachings of the Seven-Pointed Star and the commandments of the gods. I have never denied the supremacy of the Seven, or their number and constitution, nor have I altered the Divine Office beyond the prescribed bounds.” He shrugged again. “In any case, it will all come out at the trial,” he went on. “Under canon law, I have the right
to face my accusers and name an advocate to present evidence in my defense. I still have a few friends in Westeros who would be willing to defy the Most Devout.”

Robert laid the scroll down on the table and leaned back in his chair. “How confident are you that you can win an acquittal?” he asked bluntly.

Jonothor spread his hands. “Before an impartial court, I would be reasonably confident,” he replied. “As it is, I doubt that the Most Devout would be a model of impartiality in my case. Accused heretics do not usually find favorable listeners at the Great Sept. Have you heard of Jon Wicleff?”

Robert frowned. “Name rings a bell,” he said slowly, “but I can’t place it.”

“He was another who believed that the Faith needed to change,” Jonothor explained, “and in arguing so he ran afoul of the Great Sept. His death was suitably gruesome.” Jonothor bowed his head. “The Stranger waits for us all,” he said somberly, “and although I would rather keep him waiting a while longer, I will accept whatever judgment the Father levies upon me.”

Robert frowned. “The Faith can’t actually execute you, can’t they?” he asked. “As I recall, someone sentenced to death by the Faith must be handed over to secular authority to be actually executed.”

“That much is true,” Jonothor admitted, “but I cannot foresee the Most Devout encountering any difficulty in that regard. King Stannis is, by all reports, a dutiful son of the Faith, if not an enthusiastic one.” He stood. “By your leave, Your Grace, I have some final business to attend to before I leave tomorrow.”

“No you don’t,” Robert said, having made his decision between one word and the next. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

Jonothor froze, blinking rapidly. “Your Grace,” he said slowly, as if to a somewhat dense child, “I am summoned to the Great Sept. One does not simply refuse such a summons.”

“One does when the summons is illegal,” Robert replied. “Listen, whatever heresy you did, you did in the Kingdom of Myr, correct?” At Jonothor’s hesitant nod he plunged ahead. “So even if the Most Devout were able to judge you, they would have to hand you over to me for execution. And since I will not do so, there is no point to you making such a long journey and undergoing such dangers when you don’t need to.”

Jonothor opened his mouth, then closed it. “The argument has some merit,” he allowed finally, “but it ignores the central issue. If you give me safe harbor, Your Grace, then you will declare yourself to be an abettor of heresy and an enemy of the Faith.” He spread his hands. “I submit, Your Grace, that your kingdom has enough enemies already without adding the Faith to their ranks.”

Robert stood. “Have you forgotten the oaths I swore?” he asked softly. “The oaths you witnessed when you put the crown on my head? I swore to defend the faiths of my people, to uphold the rights of their clergy, and to protect them against all their enemies, wheresoever they may arise.” He shrugged. “If the Most Devout choose to make themselves the enemy of my people, then they can take the consequences.”

Jonothor shook his head. “Your responsibility to the rest of your people outweighs your responsibility to me,” he replied. “The Faith can be one of the strongest pillars of this kingdom, along with the Royal Army and the Red Temple. Even if the Seven never claim more than a third...
to a half of the smallfolk, they will still provide another means of binding them and the Faithful nobility to the kingdom and its mission of destroying slavery. If, on the other hand, that prop is turned against this kingdom . . .” Jonothor grimaced. “Imagine this kingdom placed under interdict, Your Grace. The Divine Office unsaid, the dead unable to be buried with the rites of the Faith or in sacred ground, the sacraments unperformed, the septs closed . . .” He shook his head. “Better that I should suffer whatever penalty the Faith levies upon me than that I should bring down such a fate upon the people who look to me for spiritual guidance.”

Robert leaned forward, planting his knuckles on the desk. “Let them,” he rumbled, his brows furrowing again. “We shall reopen the septs and celebrate the sacraments anyway.”

Jonothor’s jaw dropped, his face turning white. “Your Grace,” he stammered, “are you seriously proposing to lead the kingdom into schism deliberately?”

“That is exactly what I am proposing,” Robert said. “I am the King of Myr, not the High Septon, and I will not be dictated to by some soft-handed dress-wearing pimp who has done less for my kingdom than the least of my soldiers.” He tilted his head to look past Jonothor. “Maran!” he roared. “Get in here!”

As Maran scuttled in, Robert pushed himself away from the desk and squared his shoulders. “Take dictation,” he told his secretary, who situated himself at the fireplace table and took up a quill. “To His Holiness the High Septon,” Robert began. “I have been told of your excommunication of my trusty and well-beloved friend Septon Jonothor from the Faith and your summoning of him to King’s Landing to answer the charge of heresy. Upon interviewing Septon Jonothor myself, in my office as Defender of the Faiths, I have determined that he has done nothing to warrant such treatment, and that both the order of excommunication and the summons to appear are thereby invalid. Septon Jonothor has at every point in his service with the Sunset Company and the Kingdom of Myr acted in accordance with the highest traditions of the Faith, has earned the gratitude of the Crown for his deeds multiple times, and retains the complete faith of the people of his parish, his fellow septons, and of myself in both my office as King and in my private person. Accordingly, I have directed him to remain at his post in the First Sept of Myr and continue in the duties of his office.” He nodded. “Add the usual salutations, but none of the usual pleasantries; I want to convey my displeasure at him. Write up a fair copy tonight and I’ll review it with the Small Council tomorrow.”

As Maran left the room, Jonothor bowed low. “Your Grace,” he said humbly, “I truly appreciate your willingness to protect me, but I fear that you are making a grievous mistake. The Faith is not an ordinary enemy.”

“Jon Arryn, Tywin Lannister, Hoster Tully, and Mace Tyrell all told me that I was making a grievous mistake when I abdicated the Iron Throne and formed the Sunset Company,” Robert replied, gesturing broadly at the room. “And behold, here we are. If I have learned anything, Jonothor, it is that there is nothing that cannot be overcome with sufficient courage, skill, and might.” He bared his teeth. “How many companies does the High Septon have?” he asked rhetorically.

XXX

“You’re too fucking slow!!” the exiled knight roared, all but dancing in rage. “Spur up, man, spur up! Faster, faster, fast-oh for fuck’s sake!” There was a thump as the trainee’s lance hit the shield on the quintain, a creaking as the quintain’s arms revolved around the central post, and then another thump, this one rather heavier, as the sackful of wet sand on the other arm caught the trainee on the back of the head and knocked him off his horse to land heavily on the packed earth
of the lists. The exiled knight snatched off his cap and dashed it to the ground with a cry of "Godsdamnit!" and strode towards the line of other trainees who were sitting their horses on the other end of the lists.

"Are those lily wands?!" he demanded. "Are you soldiers?! You’re supposed to kill the other bastards; at that speed you won’t even tickle them! It’s enough to make the knightly aura of my blood turn to effluent!" He propped his fists on his hips as he glared at the trainees, who for their part stared at him with a sort of paralyzed fixation. "How many times do I have to tell you?" he demanded. "You lock your lance under your arm, you lean forward, you dig your spurs in, you get your nag up to speed, and you don’t stop this side of Hellgates! It’s not difficult when you do it right! Now again, from the top! You!" He aimed a finger at the trainee at the right end of the line. "Take your mark! And show some spirit this time or so help me gods I will put some on the end of my cock and ram it up your arse!"

Daario Naharis shrugged to himself as the trainee in question heeled his horse forward. The exiled knight, a Second Son who had been exiled from the Reach for murder, attempted kidnap, and chronic inability to pay his debts, had an abrasive manner that was exacerbated by his short temper, but he was universally recognized as the best lancer in Tyroshi service, so the men he was trying to turn into Andal-style armored lancers put up with him. And to give him his due, he was doing a decent job of it; the sellswords he was training not only knew how to ride, but they also knew how to use weapons from horseback, thereby removing the first problem of training a cavalry recruit. In further aid of the matter, the men he was training were throwing themselves at the problem with the determination of men whose livelihood was in danger. The few Stormcrows who had survived Tara had told enough stories of fighting the Andal heavy cavalry to impress upon even the densest listener that the future of cavalry warfare in the Disputed Lands was the armored lancer deployed in mass. A company that could field such cavalry in numbers was a company that would not only be able to survive the coming wars, but come out of them in a position to dominate the market.

Fortunately their employers were also sensing the tide of progress. While Tyrosh was more famous for its armor than its blades, the Andal-style arming sword with its rigid, diamond-cross-sectioned blade and needle-like point was easy enough to copy for a decent armorer and the number of skilled armorsmiths who called Tyrosh home meant that every heavy cavalryman could be equipped with at least a sword, a breastplate, a pot helm, and tassets. Provided, of course, they were willing to cover the cost of their new equipment, either in hard coin or on credit against their pay. Daario snorted to himself; trust merchants to find ways to make or save money, even with a hard and brutal war in the offing. If anything the Tyroshi did was going to undermine their chances of victory, it was the ingrained impulse to turn a profit on the fighting, or at least minimize any losses.

He glanced at the lances each trainee was using. *Especially when their enemies give them a push in that regard*, he thought sourly.

The simple fact was that armies used a lot of seasoned wood. Lances, crossbows, tent poles, spear-shafts, axe handles, carts, saddle-trees, barrels . . . the list went on and on. Lances and spear-shafts, in particular, required relatively long, straight, and knot-less lengths of ash or fir or oak. Ships required even more wood, again in the form of long, straight, knot-free boards. That required trees, and one of the few things that Tyrosh did not have either in its mainland domains or on its island possessions was an abundance of suitable trees; centuries of ship-building and other construction had denuded the Disputed Lands and the Stepstones both of forests worthy of the name. The few that remained were more on the order of groves than proper woodlands, and were mostly maintained to provide hunting grounds for the Tyroshi nobility.

Ordinarily, this would not be a problem; Tyroshi merchants had been buying timber from the
Stormlands for generations, and the commercial contacts that had been forged in the process were strong and extensive. The problem was that, again, the old paths in which the affairs of the Narrow Sea had walked for so long had been jarred awry. Westerosi merchants that for years and years had called Tyroshi merchants their friends and partners suddenly had no time for them and no words beyond curses; the raids of the Myrish exiles against the Westerosi mainland had soured their hearts and illustrated to them that their erstwhile partners were now at least the hosts of their enemies, if not enemies themselves. And then the Braavosi had gotten involved.

The Tyroshi timber cartel had paid one hundred silver ducats per hundredweight of seasoned timber landed on the docks of Tyrosh. The Sealord of Braavos, it seemed, was now offering one hundred and fifty silver dinars per hundredweight of seasoned timber on the docks of Stonhelm, the main port of exit for exported Stormlands timber, as well as the cost of shipping the timber to Braavos if a Westerosi ship was so contracted, payable either in hard coin or in sight drafts on the Iron Bank, which were as good as coined gold from Lorath to Qarth. Similar offers in King’s Landing, Gulltown, and White Harbor combined to effectively shut Tyrosh out of the Westerosi timber market. Ordinarily this could have been compensated for by buying Qohorik timber through Volantis, but there were problems there too. Volantis was casting covetous eyes up the Rhoyne towards Dagger Lake, and in consequence the Qohorik were cutting back on the amount of timber they were allowing to be shipped downriver. What little did come down the Rhoyne was almost immediately bought up by the Triarchs, who also needed all the wood they could get to supply the needs of their new army.

The result was that the new heavy cavalry of Tyrosh, and the spearmen of the citizen’s militia, were training with cast-iron poles instead of lances and spears, which would be issued from the city arsenal in the event of war. Daario knew that there was a side benefit to the necessity in that it would strengthen the men’s arms more than they would be otherwise, but it was still best to train with the weapons you were actually going to fight with, if at all possible. The Archon had sent agents to Oldtown and Lannisport seeking timber, but those voyages would take months if not years to bear fruit, and the Tyroshi fleet had claimed first priority on the first shipment of seasoned timber, in order to retain their numeric edge over the Myrish.

Daario sighed as the third trainee in the line walked his horse forward to take his turn at the quintain. One problem at a time, old son, he reminded himself. Sufficient to the day is the difficulty thereof.
Serina Phassos sighed and shook her head at the sight of the black eye on her brother Adaran’s face. “What was it this time?” she asked wearily. “Did someone compose an inferior sonnet to the Nightingale’s eyebrow?”

Adaran gave her the sidelong look that every long-suffering younger sibling has given their nosy, interfering elders down the centuries. “No,” he said, drawing out the word not quite long enough for insolence, “that slaver-lover Illyros Forin said that we should let the Kingdom of Myr fight its own battles. I disputed his position.”

Serina cocked an eyebrow as she sat down at the table. “A fist is a tool of debate now?” she asked, glancing up as one of the kitchen maids brought in a basket of rolls. “Thank you, Minysa,” she said politely, drawing a smile from the maid; the superiority of master to servant went without saying, as her mother had taught her, but a noblewoman of Braavos never treated the help like slaves. Part of that was knowing their names and thanking them for service done well and promptly.

“Seems to be working well enough for the Andals,” Adaran replied, seizing a roll and splitting it in half with his knife. “The slavers operate on fear and power anyway,” he went on, buttering his roll as he did so. “If you want to talk to them, it helps to speak their language.”

Their father Ballario glanced up from his slice of frittata to fix Adaran with a look that was no less steely for being mild. “The Forins aren’t slavers,” he said brusquely. “I should know; I’ve been in business with them for forty years. Make sure you’re certain of your target before you loose your words, boy.”

Adaran returned his father’s look. “I know they’re not slavers, father,” he said reasonably, “but what are we supposed to call those who do business with the slavers and close their eyes to the fact of slavery? Which is more vile; the one who commits a crime, or the one who stands aside and allows it to be committed?”

Ballario’s gaze hardened. “Enough, boy,” he said definitively. “I do not dispute the question, but I will not allow you to insult my partners under my roof.” Adaran opened his mouth to continue the argument, but closed it as Ballario’s gaze became adamantine. Standing from his chair he bowed shortly and strode away, his hand darting out to filch another roll as he went. Serina watched her brother walk away and sighed softly through her nose. The Moonsingers knew she loved her younger brother dearly, but he needed to learn not to provoke their father so.

Ballario blew his cheeks out as he leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry you had to see that, my dear,” he said to her. “Strife in a family is an ill thing, be it never so mild.”

Serina shrugged slightly. “Better that I know of it, at least,” she replied. “If only to know it exists.”

Her father gestured acknowledgement. “Even so,” he rumbled, in the mildly embarrassed tone that colored his words whenever such matters arose. He shook his head. “Adaran’s a good lad, but he will let his heart run away with his head so. It’s that damned faction he’s fallen into, these Sharks as they call themselves. Pack of idle louts whose families don’t give them enough work and let them run to mischief.” He shook his head again, like a bull pestered by flies. “When I was a lad, young men of that age were kept too busy to get up to devilment.”
Serina toyed with her frittata. “From what my friends tell me, the Whales aren’t much better,” she offered. “Nilona told me yesterday that her brothers have been present at four fights in the past six days, and three of them provoked by Whales.”

The Sharks and the Whales were the two factions that had sprung up in Braavosi politics since the end of the First Slave War; the names had originated as derogatory insults that had quickly been adopted. The Sharks favored joining the Kingdom of Myr in their crusade against slavery, not simply with monetary aid but with arms. *To the ships!* was their cry. *Spread the First Law at the sword’s point! Remind the slavers why they fear the Titan!* They were mostly young hotheads, as her father had said, but they also counted magisters among their number, and a frankly disturbing number of soldiers and fleet sailors eager to wipe out the stain of paying tribute to Khal Zirqo the Faithless.

The Whales, by contrast, preferred to keep their involvement in the fray to a minimum. They saw little point, or so they claimed, in spending Braavosi treasure and blood when the Kingdom of Myr not only did both so well, but placed their treasury effectively at the mercy of the Iron Bank. *Let the Andals shoulder the burden they had assumed,* they said, *and let them carry Braavos to new heights of wealth and influence in the Narrow Sea.*

Her father nodded. “And my own friends have told me of more such outbursts,” he said. “Common brawls and proper duels both. No one has died yet, but the Night Watch fears the worst.” He waved a hand. “But enough of such talk,” he went on, his voice turning brisk. “You’ve had four days and nights to consider Magister Nestyris’ offer on behalf of his son; what say you?”

Serina spread her hands. “If it is your will that I accept, father, than I shall certainly do so,” she said guilelessly. “But is it entirely fitting for one of our house to marry a younger son of a family that only reached the rank of magister three years ago? You said yourself that you would have no tradesman for a son-in-law.”

“Tradesman, bosh,” Ballario replied. “The Nestyris’s are perfectly respectable, and their second son is a good young man, or so I have heard.”

“A good young man who has yet to make his first voyage,” Serina rejoined. “Surely you would not force me to wed an untested youth, father?”

“I would see you wed to a good man, and that quickly,” her father said seriously. “You and Adaran are the only heirs in the direct line of this house, and I know my cousins for the spendthrift wastrels they are. I will not suffer them to lay claim to your inheritance, girl, or Adaran’s.”

Serina bowed her head. She knew the law; in the event that a minor child had no living parents, custody passed to their nearest living relative, with preference shown to the male line. And with custody of their persons came control of their inheritance and their betrothal and marriage until they came of age. Her father was past六十, and the brown had long since leached out of his hair and beard; she and her younger brother had been born late in their parents’ lives, and their mother had died birthing a stillborn daughter. If, all the gods prevent, her father died before either of them attained their majority, then they would certainly be at the mercy of their father’s cousins, the best of whom simply had a weakness for gambling that was matched by his ineptitude. The thought of their house being mortgaged or even sold in order to pay off his debts, or of being forced into a marriage to one of their cousins’ more unsavory business partners, simply did not bear thinking of. And while Adaran might be able to resist or flee, she would have no such recourse. Indeed, even the worst case would appear to outsiders to be only the fulfilling of familial obligation. At sixteen she was old to be unbetrothed; the average age of betrothal among the Braavosi magisters was fourteen or fifteen, for girls and boys both. This, it was acknowledged but never explicitly stated,
was so that young men going on their first voyage in the City’s trading fleets had something more than mere filial obligation and patriotic duty to prevent them from jumping ship in a foreign land for romance’s sake or, even more shocking, bringing a foreign bride back to the City. It happened on occasion, but social opprobrium meant that such marriages rarely prospered.

All of which meant that she had to either marry or at least become betrothed, and soon; even a marriage of convenience would be better than one of force. The problem was that none of the unattached men of her age and station were men that she could consider living the rest of her life with without being bored out of her mind.

And while some of her friends might come near to swooning at the thought of being carried away by some dashing, handsome, chivalrous Andal knight, much to the vexation of their brothers and cousins, Serina had no such illusions. Her station and her family’s wealth meant that she had to marry for the sake of advantage more than anything, and a rich lordling who had turned his back on land and fortune to fight in a worthy cause, or a hedge knight dreaming of fortune and glory, would have little to offer her family.

And besides, for her to succumb to such fantasies would smack of hypocrisy. Had she not called two of her closest friends a pair of fools just yesterday for dreaming too long on the thought of marrying Jaime Lannister or Robert Baratheon?

XXX

Eddard looked across the training yard to where Robert was exercising at one of the pells and frowned pensively. Ordinarily, when Robert was at the pell, he fought the man-high oak post almost as if it were a living opponent, dancing about it on the balls of his feet and darting back and forth to strike at it with his hammer, surprisingly light-footed for a man his size. Today, however, Robert had simply squared up to the pell and was methodically beating at it with his hammer, chips flying from where the blunt serrations on the striking face of his hammer had gouged at the wood.

It wasn’t like Robert to practice so sloppily; there was always the temptation for a man as large and strong as Robert to neglect their mobility in favor of raw strength and heavy armor, but their masters-of-arms had never let Robert fall into that trap. And Robert had continued those habits after leaving the Eyrie. Something, therefore, was out of joint.

He turned to Saul, who had recently become his squire and was almost painfully keen to learn how to fight. “Pair with Daimh, tell him I said he was to teach you the guard of the boar,” he said. Saul nodded and trotted over to where Daimh was supervising some of the newer household men at drill, while Eddard walked across the yard towards Robert, shouldering his longsword. “If you’re trying to cut that thing down, I would suggest an axe,” he said lightly, making Robert pause and look at him dully. Eddard blinked; Robert looked terrible. His face was drawn, his eyes red, and he looked more subdued than he had since King’s Landing. “Are you all right, brother?” he asked. “You look like someone drank all your beer.”

Robert let the haft of his hammer slip through his fingers until the butt hit the ground and folded his hands over the hammerhead. “I asked Alaesa to marry me,” he said wearily. “She refused. Said she wasn’t cut out to be a queen and anyway women like her didn’t get to be queens. They just got to live in comfort all their days and bear the children that men didn’t feel like giving their wives.”

“Ah,” Eddard said, nodding in acknowledgement, before gesturing with the hand that wasn’t holding his longsword on his shoulder. “Well, as hints go, at least it’s pretty clear . . .”

“Damn you Ned, it’s not funny,” Robert snapped, a thread of anger entering his voice. “I swore, after Pentos, that I wouldn’t treat a woman like a whore. If I keep Alaesa as a mistress, I would be
doing exactly that, and I wouldn’t even be able to have the excuse of ignorance this time.” He sighed gustily, looking down towards the short-mowed grass. “She’s the only woman who’s been able to make me laugh, actually laugh, since Lyanna,” he said softly. “I know I have to marry, and that quickly, but I don’t want to marry some brainless bint with nothing of worth but her name and her womb. I’m owed a bit more happiness than that, surely?”

Eddard nodded again, then jerked his head towards the rest of the yard. “Come on, let’s spar.”

Robert shook his head. “I’m not . . .” he began.

“Best thing for you,” Eddard said over him. “Get your mind off Alaesa for a little while at least.”

Robert stood looking at the ground for a moment more, almost like one of the more brooding statues of the Warrior, before looking up and nodding. “Fine then,” he said. “But not with longswords. I saw your match against Jaime; I’m not in the mood to look like an ox.”

“Arming sword and buckler,” Eddard promised.

A few moments later the two foster brothers were standing towards the edge of the training yard, having swapped longsword and hammer for their arming swords and a buckler apiece. The first exchange was slow and almost tentative, ending with a wrist cut from Eddard that came to rest on the inside of Robert’s knee, but afterwards they became faster and more forthright, until eventually Eddard and Robert were throwing cuts almost as hard and fast as they would have thrown them at Tyroshi regulars and raising a discordant cling-ting-scrcing of metal on metal. Their last exchange ended in Eddard catching Robert’s blade in an elegant bind, whereupon Robert dropped blade and buckler both to rush in, wrap his arms around Eddard’s midriff, heave him bodily off his feet and throw him to the ground with a powerful writhing twist like a massive python, and almost draw his rondel dagger before he remembered that this was his brother-in-all-but-blood that was pinned underneath him. Slowly he got to his feet, hauling Eddard along with him.

“You really are getting better,” he said. “You wouldn’t have even tried that last bind when we were at the Vale.”

“Of course not, since I only learned it two sennights ago,” Eddard replied, handing sword and buckler off to Saul, who had been watching them wide-eyed along with all the rest of Eddard and Robert’s households that were currently at drill. As Daimh and Ser Dafyn Otley roared the cheering men back to their exercises, Robert and Eddard strode over to one of the wooden benches that were scattered around the periphery of the training yard. Saul met them there with a canteen of watered wine each and hovered a moment more until Eddard raised an eyebrow at him and nodded towards Daimh. “Saul’s a good lad,” he told Robert. “A bit too eager, though. If he hadn’t been under strict orders to remain with the baggage train he’d have jumped into Narrow Run with both feet, and him barely fourteen.”

“Better to have to restrain the stallion than prod the mule,” Robert replied. “He’ll learn.” He tipped back his canteen for a pull and wiped his mouth with his the back of his hand afterwards. “I’ll ask Alaesa again tomorrow,” he said. “Who knows, maybe she’ll have changed her mind.”

Eddard shook his head. “Only if you want to forfeit her regard for you,” he said firmly. “You asked her, she said no, that ends the matter. Part of not treating a woman like a whore is respecting her choices.” At Robert’s raised eyebrow he shrugged. “I’ve only been married a few months, but I learned that much in the first sennight.”

Robert shook his head. “Maybe I should take a tip from you,” he said. “Go down to the docks, find a willing woman, and have her turn out to a desirable and worthy wife.”
“You truly think so?” Eddard asked. “When I married Amarya, I was no one important; simply the King of Myr’s mad dog who he kept around to set on his enemies. Who I married didn’t matter to anyone but me.” Which was no longer strictly true, given that Robert had granted him a wide swathe of lands bordering on the royal demesne around Myr city as a wedding gift. Calculating by acreage, Eddard was one of the two or three greatest men in the Kingdom of Myr. “You, on the other hand, are a king; who you marry matters a great deal indeed.” He took a sip from his canteen. “If you want my advice, after Alaesa’s refusal,” he went on, “then I would recommend that you look to Braavos for a wife. At the moment the Braavosi see us as customers, and a proxy who can do the lion’s share of the dying in this phase of their long war against slavery. If they see one of their own as our queen, and an heir to our throne that is half-Braavosi . . .” he shrugged.

Robert frowned. “You think that we might pull them into the war openly?” he asked.

“I think that it would make it harder for the peace party in Braavos, these Whales, as we’ve heard them called, to argue that we should be left to do all the fighting and dying if doing so weakens the position of a Braavosi citizen,” Eddard replied. “And if Gerion can finagle a treaty out of them at the same time that unequivocally states that Braavos will join us in the event of war, then we will have won the most powerful navy in the known world to our side. You know as well as I, brother, how much we need such a navy.”

Robert nodded. The Royal Fleet was growing again, but only slowly, and even after incorporating the remains of Erik Ironmaker’s fleet it still numbered only one ninety-five longships and fifty galleys. “I will think on it,” he conceded. “After I see Alaesa settled. And I say it now, Ned,” he looked Eddard in the eye. “Whoever I marry, Alaesa’s child will be a Baratheon. It was stories of my bastards that made Lyanna wary of marrying me; with the gods as my witness, I’ll not sire another child without giving them my name. To shit with the consequences.”

Eddard nodded slowly and deeply. “As you say, Your Grace.”

Author's note: My beta reader and I considered not having Braavosian politics split between a peace party and a war party, but it just made too much sense not to put in. Braavos has been coexisting with the slaver cities for centuries; it stands to reason that at least some of the Braavosi magisters and trading cartels would be reluctant to go to war against their customers and business partners.
Ambition and Humility

Balon Greyjoy stared out the window as his maester finished reading the letter that had arrived that morning by raven from King’s Landing, doing his level best to contain the anger boiling through his veins. “Read that last part again,” he said, his voice rigid with self-control. “The part just before the salutation.”

There was a light cough as the maester cleared his throat and a soft rustle of parchment as he raised the letter again. “We require you, therefore,” he quoted in the calm voice of a professional reader, “in accordance with the law of the Realm, to forestall, stay, and prevent any attempt by Ser Harras to resume his place in the succession of House Harlaw or to assume the lordship of that House or any cadet branch thereof, by whatever means you deem fit and proper. Any aid you may require in this regard shall be provided. Given under our hand . . .”

Balon silenced him with a raised hand, not trusting himself to speak without losing his hold on his temper. By the God, the arrogance, he seethed in the privacy of his mind. That he, the Lord Reaper of Pyke, the Son of the Sea Wind, should be spoken to like some damned servant . . .

Ruthlessly he bottled his rage, forcing his still-raised hand to uncurl from the fist he had clenched it into. It had been difficult, the first few times, but he had gotten much better at it, over these past two years. The God knew he had plenty of practice.

Ever since his father had sailed away to the Dornish rebellion he had been given cause for fury, and no opportunity to remedy it. First he had been left in the Isles when there was blood to be spilled and reputations to be made; the only reputation Balon had made from that war had been that of a stay-at-home, and one who had come when called like a dog to boot, after Stannis had summoned him to Sunspear to pledge his fealty. Given a choice, Balon would have stayed on Pyke, but that would have risked Euron being asked to pledge fealty on his behalf, which would all to easily have led to the impression that, as Euron was the one who had done homage, it was Euron who was rightfully Lord of the Iron Isles.

And then his brother, his faithless, false-hearted, traitorous brother, had refused his direct command to come home and instead set himself up as a lord in his own right; a lord who welcomed all who found themselves dissatisfied with Balon’s rule, or who simply wanted to honor the Old Way as they couldn’t in the Isles. The flood of men, and not just runaway thralls and nameless karls, but fighting-men and lords, to join the traitor’s standard had been galling. Even worse, some of them were now coming back, telling tales to any who would listen of the wealth and fame that could be gained in the east, and the honor in which the Ironborn were held as the Kingdom of Myr’s seaward shield.

Balon spat out the window. As if it did not matter that to go to Myr was to become one of Robert the Brief’s dogs, little better than a hired hand. The Isles were poor, he admitted it, but here the sons of the sea were the masters of their fates, and answered to none but their freely chosen lords. Unfortunately, few of the Ironborn seemed to share his view of the situation; of the fifteen thousand trained warriors that House Greyjoy could theoretically call to their banner, barely eight thousand remained in the Isles. And those that remained were not all they might be. Many were older men, already settled with wives and families and reputations, while others either didn’t have the ambition to sail so far to make their reputations or were so troublesome and cross-grained that they couldn’t find a crew that would take them. Of the rest, a minority were established lords and
their housekarls who had no need to seek fame and fortune in foreign lands, but many more simply didn’t like House Greyjoy to the point where even a rebel Greyjoy was unpalatable; those, Balon had learned, often spent their evenings muttering that the current occupant of the Seastone Chair was unworthy of it.

Not that Balon feared an attempt at overthrow; Pyke was not the richest or the largest of the islands, but his hold over those of his directly sworn warriors that still remained to him was still strong, and none of the potential usurpers had the strength to defeat him and every other claimant. For a certainty none of his other brothers would attempt it; Euron seemed content enough as one of Stannis’ lapdogs, Urrigon was a dullard, and Aeron was a drunk. And as popular as Victarion was, Balon was still the Lord Reaper, with the power and the ability to reward his followers that that entailed. He was not loved, but he was not openly hated or despised either.

And there were ways of winning the love of the Ironborn. He turned away from the window to fix his maester with a look. “Take dictation,” he said, driving the maester to produce parchment, quill, and ink. “To His Grace King Stannis,” he began, “I fail to understand the necessity of preventing Ser Harras’ assumption of his rightful inheritance. He has done good service in your brother’s wars, is a true and faithful son of the Isles, and has committed no crime for which he deserves to be disinherited. All this being so, I cannot justly or honorably forbid him from assuming his inheritance of Grey Garden and his place in the succession to the Lordship of Harlaw.” He waved his hand. “Add the usual titles and write out a fair copy for my signature.”

As his maester busied himself at the desk he turned back toward the window. Of all qualities the Ironborn respected courage and strength most of all, and the best way for him to show both in this situation was to champion his bannerman’s cause against the king, wherever that road led him. If nothing else his good-brother the Reader would be properly grateful; Harras was his cousin, after all. And if what he had heard of Harras’ deeds in the east was true, then he would be no mean personage himself in years to come. He would only be inheriting Grey Garden and not Harlaw itself, as the Reader had two living sons, but a man with a name such as Harras had earned in Myr would not be one to trifle with.

Although if Balon played his cards right, his name would grow to outshine even his treacherous brother’s. Victarion might bend the knee to a greenlander king and eat the scraps from his table, but Balon would stand tall and tell an even greater king where to shove his commands. He knew which course would earn greater respect from his people.

XXX

The Bahaan Bakery was one of the institutions of Blackpetal Lane. Owned and worked by the same family for three generations, it served almost every family in a three-block radius, as well as a few noble houses before the Siege, and it had done so with a consistency of quality, price, and quantity that had made them one of the most formidable bakeries in their district. Bakers starting a new shop knew better than to try and open a storefront in the area Bahaan’s served; they would never be able to survive, much less turn a profit.

Old Janos, the current patriarch of the Bahaan family, lived his life after the Siege in almost exactly the same way that he had done before it. Every day at the fourth hour before sunrise he awoke, along with his wife, his two adult sons and their wives, and his six grandchildren, and led them downstairs to light the ovens. That first ritual of the day done, he led them in a quick prayer to the Lord of Light; strictly speaking, the Dawn Prayer had to be said, well, at dawn, but High Priest Danikos had issued a dispensation to the city’s bakers in view of the fact that dawn saw them already hard at work, and High Priest Kalarus had confirmed it after his ascension.
Prayers finished, the bakery became a hive of activity as the family prepared for the day’s business. While the children put out the day-old bread and made sure the front of the store was swept and clean for their customers, the adults mixed the day’s dough. Janos led the storm of activity at the mixing and kneading counters as he had done every day for the forty years since his father’s early death, the precision with which he measured out water and flour and salt and yeast and the care with which he mixed and kneaded belied by the speed with which he did so. Under his knobby-knuckled hands a loaf of bread could go from raw ingredients to rising dough with almost unbelievable speed, faster even than his sons, whom he had taught every trick and secret he knew and had the strength and stamina of comparative youth to speed their work. There were things you learned in almost sixty years as a baker.

It was said that Janos Bahaan was the finest baker in the tradesmen’s district, perhaps the finest in Myr. He never said so himself, had never dreamed of saying so. To him it was simply his life, the life given to him when he had been born in the upstairs bedroom where he and his wife had brought their children into the world.

By the time that the last round of loaves were leaving the oven the sun was coming up, and the customers with it. Old Arario and Vogonno, the two City Watchmen who had walked the night patrol in their part of the district, had been killed in the sack that had followed the Siege, but they had been replaced by Varynno and Lazello, also City Watchmen of the night patrol, who on their way home from the Watch house stopped by to pick up a loaf apiece. Janos chatted with them briefly, as he had done with Arario and Vogonno, and learned that they had had a quiet shift, with no murders, only two robberies, and, unusually, a burglary. He assured them that he kept his windows locked during the nights (he did) and kept his valuables safely hidden (under a floorboard underneath the bed he shared with his wife for the most part, although his sons had convinced him to open an account with the Iron Bank that the weekly profit now went into) and they went on their way, Lazello ruffling the hair of Janos’ youngest grandson affectionately as he went.

Next there came the servants, maids and errand boys collecting the standing orders of those noble houses that Bahaan’s provided bread for; a noble house’s cook certainly could and would make bread, but that was the bread that was served on special occasions or to guests. The bread that the household ate on a day to day basis could only be provided in the necessary quantities by a dedicated bakery. They were paid servants now, not slaves, but the gossip was much the same, even if most of the names had changed; Lord So-and-So was in a temper about taxes, young Master Such-and-Such was chasing after Lord So-and-So’s daughter, Lady This-and-That was entertaining male callers while her husband was out on business. Janos responded to all of these little tales with a shake of the head, or a laugh, or a wry comment, or an exaggerated shrug, as the case called for, while he filled their baskets with their orders, and sent them on their way with thanks for their business and a kind word or two to those who seemed to need it.

Then there came everyone else; tradesmen, small merchants, notaries, day workers, students, City Watchmen, even a few soldiers seeking to supplement their daily rations with better bread than they received in the barracks kitchens. With these last Janos had initially decided to charge them less than the usual rate, in order to be on the safe side, but the soldiers had insisted on paying the full price; their sergeants, they had explained, would go spare if they found out that they were cheating their own people. Janos, in some bemusement, had acquiesced, and had spread the word to his fellow bakers to not even think about cheating the soldiers. If a sergeant’s threatened wrath could make soldiers behave then a sergeant was a fearsome creature indeed, and not one that it would be wise to cross.

After the first rush of business the day settled into its usual ebb and flow. A slight lull in the mid-morning during which the family ate their second meal of the day (the first was usually eaten on the move, or in what few lulls existed in the pre-dawn hours) followed by another rush around
noon as people who hadn’t gotten their loaves that morning got one for luncheon and one or two more for supper. A final spurt of activity occurred around the third hour past noon, when those who discovered that they didn’t have quite enough bread for supper dashed in to buy a loaf or two, and then the shop closed. But the daily work didn’t finish there. The children plied their brooms again, while the adults banked the oven fires and cleaned the counters; bakers learned to be fastidious from a young age, in order to stave off mice and ants, and Janos was a firm believer that if you took care of your store, then your store would take care of you.

The family ate supper earlier than non-bakers did, around five hours past noon, thanks to their earlier start to the day, and then the usual household affairs occurred. The grandchildren would take their lessons from their grandmother, Janos’ sons would do whatever work was needed around the store or the upstairs living quarters while their father calculated the daily take, and their wives would do whatever washing, sewing, or cleaning came to hand. It was a day like any other, and in the forty years since he had taken over the shop Janos had only missed twenty such days of work. Four for the births of each of his children (his two sons, a daughter who was now married to a butcher, and a second daughter who had been stillborn), three for the marriages of his children, eight for the births of his grandchildren (four from one son, two from the other, and two from his daughter), one when his mother had died, the day in which the city had been stormed, and the three days of the sack.

Bahaan’s had survived the sack of course; by law buildings containing bakeries had to be constructed entirely of stone, against the risk of fire, so what few fires had been set had posed no danger. And Janos had never owned a slave, had never had the wealth to buy and maintain one or the need for one, and he had been known as one who would give a sympathetic ear and a kind word to anyone, even if they wore collar and brand. Even in the artisan’s district they had heard that of him, and so he and his had been spared, thanks to the small band of former household slaves who had joined him and his sons in guarding the bakery and directed potential looters to look elsewhere.

Immediately after the sack had ended he had reopened the bakery. People didn’t stop needing bread simply because the world had been broken into pieces and reassembled in entirely the wrong order, after all. And more than that, Janos had needed the world to feel normal, after the sack, and the only way in which his world could be normal was to open the bakery and put in a solid day’s work. That had been noticed, and his name writ down somewhere, though he had known it not. If he had had his say his name would have been forgotten, but that was out of his hands. Lord Stark had not given much thought to the use of informants among the people of the city when he was the King’s Hand, but the new Hand, Ser Gerion or whatever his name was, had less faith in his fellow subjects it seemed. Which had led to the change in Janos Bahaan’s life.

It had been three months since the man had come to him and explained what the Hand wanted him to do. In most ways it was quite simple; do as he had done for forty years and more and listen to the talk of his customers, but this time remember what they said, and if anything struck him as dangerous or something that the Hand should know about, report it. And also report if there was nothing much to say in either regard, so that they would be able to know if someone was impersonating him.

That last part had struck Janos as really quite silly (Impersonate him, of all people?) but the man had been quite serious. It was a known device, he had said, his brow furrowed, and people had died because of it before. So after Janos finished calculating the daily take (reading, writing, and figuring were necessary skills for an independent man of business to have, even a baker, who was normally considered among the lower occupations worthy of a guild), he pulled a sheet of parchment across the desk towards him and began to write. It was the report which he was supposed to hand off to a courier once every sennight, and so far he had nothing of interest to
Oh to be sure, he had heard rumors of complaint; the Myrish noble class had been all but extinguished during the sack but the remaining rich merchants and burghers lived in fear and horror that they would be remembered and dragged out to their deaths, the guildmasters and the other rich men of the city complained about taxes, the few small ship captains who came through his door complained incessantly of the vagaries of wind and wave and trade, but everyone complained, didn’t they? Janos considered his life to be very nearly perfect, in its way, but even he had some complaints about how it had all gone. He could have done without his mother dying, for instance, and while time had dulled the pain hardly a day went by that he didn’t remember the daughter who hadn’t survived. And of course there were the myriad minor frustrations of everyday life. People went through hardships, they complained about them, and then, for the most part, they picked up and moved on. So those grumbles he didn’t set down in his report; they simply weren’t important, in his opinion.

Nor did he have any dangerous rumors to report. For pity’s sake, he ran a bakery not some smoky tavern down by the docks where you could buy a slit throat for the price of a mug of ale. It wasn’t as if foreign spies were going to walk through his door and spill their darkest secrets like rolls from a dropped basket.

So he simply wrote down the date and _nothing of interest to report_, folded the parchment carefully, and put it back in the ledger that only he and his wife ever touched and only he ever opened. Two more days, and he would be able to take it out, carry it into the alley behind the store, and leave it under a certain rock, where it would be replaced by a handful of copper coins; due consideration for his services, he had been given to understand, given the lack of danger in his work and the unlikelihood that he would uncover something worth silver or gold. Janos shrugged; he was a respectable man who ran the most successful bakery in the tradesmen’s district, it wasn’t as if he needed the money. He would never be rich, but he wouldn’t leave his family poor, ether, and in all honesty he was content with that much. An excess of money, he had observed over the years, seemed to act like some kind of disease that made a man incapable of thinking right. If he were the ambitious sort he might have thought about how high he could rise in the Crown’s service, but Janos was fundamentally an unambitious man. He was a baker, his father and grandfather had been bakers, and his sons and grandsons would be bakers. That was how the world worked.

He poured another mug of ale for himself and blew off the foam. He would much rather, he thought sourly, have never come to the Hand’s attention.
All the Kings' Men

Ser Arthur Dayne reined his horse aside and then wheeled it back to review the company as it marched into the small square where it was to be welcomed back to Volantis. As the Company of the Dragon tramped past, he couldn’t help but feel a thrill of pride at the sight of them, one hundred and fifty knights and nine hundred heavy foot, spearmen and crossbowmen, marching proudly under the banner of the three-headed dragon. If only half of them were men of Westeros, that was only the more miraculous; that men who had never bent the knee to the Targaryens, who three months ago would have laughed in his face if he had commanded them to bend the knee, should now acknowledge Viserys Targaryen as their king.

Even better, the men were in high spirits. For the Essosi it was mere pride at an easy victory and a return to a city with good wine and good whores with a victory bonus in their pockets that was making them strut, but the Westerosi were even more changed. When they had marched out from the city they had done so correctly enough but there had been very little pride in the men who had suffered so many defeats and such an astonishing betrayal. But now they were returning from their first victory in a year; an easy victory perhaps but a triumph nonetheless, when set against the catastrophe of Tara and the escape from Myr. Arthur had not seen his men march with such pride since they had marched to the field of Tara, and the sight made his eyes prickle in a way that had nothing to do with the brightness of the day.

As they filed into the square a series of commands brought the lead banda to a halt, while the other two bandas marched off to either side to change the company’s formation from column of march to line of battle before the reviewing stand. A final command brought nine hundred right feet stamping to attention, while one hundred and fifty lances swept down in salute and Ser Garin Uller, the standard-bearer of the company and the newest knight of the Kingsguard thanks to his daring in the field, dipped the banner to the Triarch; only he, Arthur, Barristan, and Donys knew that he was really saluting King Viserys, who stood at the Triarch’s right hand, taller than Arthur remembered him with an almost unnaturally grave expression on his round child’s face and Barristan standing behind him like an alabaster statue.

While the Triarch, a kettle-bellied man resplendent in embroidered velvet and gold brocade, began to pontificate on the company’s recent victory against Mantarys, Arthur was already beginning to plan the next campaign the Volantenes would send them on. The signs, Donys had written to him, were unmistakable; the Triarchs meant to declare war on Qohor, taking advantage of the perceived distraction of the Braavosi towards the Disputed Lands to extend their dominion up the Rhoyne. Norvos, it seemed, did not figure into the Triarchs’ plan, although why that might be Donys could not say.

In any case, Arthur decided as the Triarch continued to declaim at his king’s soldiers, comparing them to the heroes of Old Valyria, a war up the Rhoyne, like any war, would take logistics and good troops. The logistics would be relatively easy, thanks to the abundance of river galleys, barges, and cargo boats that plied the River Rhoyne. The good troops, on the other hand, might prove troublesome. The citizen’s militia Donys had written to him about seemed good enough for catching arrows that might hit someone important, but they wouldn’t be able to match proper men-at-arms, much less the Unsullied that Qohor relied upon for the bulk of its fighting strength. The only fighters that Volantis had which might be able to do so were the tiger cloaks, the Golden Company, and the Company of the Dragon, and of those the tiger cloaks were unreliable thanks to their R’hllorist leanings and the Golden Company wasn’t the only-somewhat-welcome-guest that
the Company of the Dragon was but a proper, genuine sellsword company. If their contract was
paid off tomorrow they would have no problem simply marching away, unlike the Company of the
Dragon.

Arthur concealed his distaste with the ease of long practice as the Triarch began to reach the end of
his oration. If the Triarchs meant for the Company of the Dragon to be ground to pieces in the
blood-mill of war, then he would have to find ways to prevent it. Or at the very least, to keep the
grinding to a minimum.

XXX

Mace Tyrell smiled beatifically as he surveyed the scene in the great hall of the Red Keep.
Ordinarily he didn’t like King’s Landing (an uglier, rougher, and more malodorous city even than
Oldtown, so unlike his beauteous and well-ordered Highgarden), but he could make an exception
for an occasion such as this. For it was a bright-shining day, there was peace from Dorne to the
Wall, the gods were in their heavens, the flower of the South and the pick of the North were
gathered in the capital, and King Stannis and Queen Cersei’s second-born child, only three months
old, was being presented to the court.

Princess Joanna, she had been named; a lovely babe, all agreed, though how exactly this was
decided Mace hadn’t the foggiest idea. One baby looked much like another, to his eyes. But even
if she had been born ugly, the important thing was that she had been born alive and healthy and
Queen Cersei seemed none the worse for it.

Even better, King Stannis had declared a holiday in honor of his daughter’s birth; the easiest way to
soften the Grim Stag’s heart, it seemed, was to give him another child. And this time, there were
no rebellions in the offing to spoil the festivities. To be sure the news from the Iron Isles was
vaguely troubling, but Mace was not unduly worried. Whatever else Balon Greyjoy might be, he
was not an utter fool. Surely he would see that provoking a war against the might of the Seven
Kingdoms, united under a monarch as vigorous as Stannis, could only lead to an early grave. Not
that there weren’t other ways to play the game of thrones, but the Ironborn had never had the
patience for finesse.

For the most part the assembled nobility seemed to have caught the mood of jubilation and were
reflecting it seven-fold. Even the usually sober Northmen were cheerful; Lord Bolton was smiling,
which judging by rumor alone Mace would have judged impossible. The only man who seemed
less than entirely content was, paradoxically, Tywin Lannister, whose habitually severe mien had
softened but not to the point of smiling. The general agreement, judging by what Mace had heard,
was that he was disappointed that his newest grandchild was a princess and not another prince to
secure the succession. Mace, however, harbored a thought that it was the child’s name more than
it’s gender that was the cause for the Old Lion’s attitude; by all accounts Tywin had truly loved his
late lady wife, and for his granddaughter to be named after her must have dredged up at least a few
painful memories.

Mace snorted softly. Spoilsport, he mentally chided the lord of Casterly Rock. Don’t you know that
this is a celebration? Not that Mace strictly cared what Tywin thought at the moment, for his stock
at court had ascended to new heights.

It had begun in the Red Viper Rebellion, when Mace had led his army into the Red Mountains.
There had been no clashes to match the Battle of the Greenblood, thanks to the relative paucity of
support for Oberyn among the Dornish marcher houses, but Stannis had publicly acknowledged
that Mace’s efforts, and those of Lord Tarly as his chief lieutenant, had kept Western Dorne from
declaring for the rebel, and helped to contain the spread of the rebellion. Even better the casualties
had been light; enough to show the depth of the Reach’s commitment to the Baratheon dynasty, but not enough to cause unrest in the Reach. The only fly in the ointment had been the price that Oberyn had put on the head of Mace’s son Willas. Even for a Dornishman, that had been beyond the pale. Mace had invaded Dorne as a move in the game of thrones; it hadn’t been personal. Not until Randyll Tarly’s guards had caught the Dornishman creeping into Willas’ tent with a poisoned dagger.

Mace had gladly paid every golden stag of the price he had put on Oberyn’s head in return, and done it in person even, to make it clear how greatly he esteemed men who did him such service. Of course it had been made easier by Ser Rickon Riverbend being the sort of man he was. In Mace’s experience, and from what he had heard, most bastards who found themselves elevated to some rank went to the bad, either through dissolution facilitated by greater wealth or because they couldn’t see past the chip on their shoulder. But Ser Rickon had seemed not to have been so moved, despite the magnitude of his elevation; indeed he seemed a fine knight and a pious, good-natured man, if a touch over-courteous.

And the Royal Order of the Sun had been a fascinating concept. It was unlikely that he would be able to establish a similar order in the Reach, but he certainly planned to learn what he could of it. He had already made up his mind to send Loras to serve a term under the Order’s banner when he was ready to squire.

Mace shook his head and brought himself back to the present, allowing his smile to grow by a few more teeth as he did so. He had known his gift for the little princess would go over well.

There had been the predictable profusion of gold and silver and ivory rattles and toys from people of lesser imagination. Tywin had presented a masterfully worked and magnificently decorated little box from Qarth that played a simple musical tune on a series of trip-hammered strings by means of a pin-studded cylinder on a wound spring. Lord Captain Euron Greyjoy, Stannis’ favorite watchdog of the Narrow Sea, had sent a scale model of his ship, the *Unspeakable*, that was perfect down to the little wooden figures of the crew on the deck and could apparently float. Brandon Stark had sent a cunningly wrought silver pendant of a single, almost impossibly intricate snowflake on a silver chain for the princess to wear when she was of a proper age. All perfectly acceptable gifts for a princess of one of the most powerful lineages in the world. But they had forgotten that Stannis prized practicality above simple display. Mace had not.

House Tyrell’s gift had been a selection of cuttings and seedlings from their personal gardens, carefully transported to the capital by a small company of gardeners to be replanted in the new gardens that had replaced the Dragonpit. Those gardens were to be a royal haven from the cares and troubles of governance, and a place where they could meet with their favorites and petitioners in less formal circumstances than might be allowable in the Red Keep. The Joanna Gardens, they were to be named, and both Stannis and Cersei were said to be determined that they were to be the finest gardens in Westeros.

Mace sipped his Arbor Gold appreciatively. A jealous man might think that such an ambition would be an insult to House Tyrell, but he was not so small-minded. And in this, as in all other things, he was happy to oblige Stannis to the best of his abilities.

XXX

*The following is an excerpt from Flash for the Faith!, the second instalment in the Flash Papers by George Dand.*

I wasn’t too surprised to receive an invitation to the presentation of Princess Joanna; I was a certified hero of the realm after all, even if only half of my exploits were public knowledge and all
of them were, in my opinion, vastly overinflated. For instance, I’ve dined out in Sunspear at least twice on the strength of being the Ser Harry Flash who slew the four Uller men at the Greenblood, when in reality I only managed to kill one of them, and that only by blind luck; it was my sergeant who killed the other three, but he died and I didn’t, so I was the one who received the laurels.

But however unjustified my reputation might have been, I wasn’t the sort to look a gift horse in the mouth in those years. Stannis was a bit of a sobersides, and when he was in a temper about something he could put the fear of the Stranger into a stone, much less me, but he knew a host’s duty well enough, and what little he forgot, his wife didn’t. I suppose being married to a Lannister has its benefits, even if Cersei always struck me as a bit of a cold fish. Face like a goddess of course, and the sort of body men would kill to see naked, but too haughty by half for my tastes. I can only imagine that it would put a fellow off his stride, to look a woman in the face when in the act and see her regarding him like an insect.

In any case once the fuss and bother of the official presentation of the royal infant was done with, Maryam and I promenaded around the great hall, gassing and being gassed at by the rest of the quality, and Maryam almost squealing with delight at the pomp and display of it all. I could almost see her thinking how splendid the hall at the family castle would look with some decoration and I felt a twinge of pity for our poor steward who would have to talk her out of commissioning a gilded chandelier or a forty-foot tapestry showing the Battle of the Greenblood.

I had just been cornered by Renly Baratheon, the baby of the Baratheon brothers, who was squeaking to be told about the Greenblood and the rest of the Dornish War when a Stormguard knight appeared at my elbow saying that Stannis was requesting my attendance on a private matter. Of course I couldn’t just say, “Why thank you, old boy, but do tell His Grace that I am extremely busy entertaining his younger brother and do not wish to be disturbed,” so I told Renly that I would have to regale him some other time, left Maryam with him, and followed the Stormguard to a small chamber at the back of the hall, behind the Throne, where we found His Grace, Lord Arryn, a wizened septon, and an older, heavyset gentleman wearing the Estermont arms. Stannis waved me up from my bow, dismissed the Stormguard, and got straight down to business, as was his way.

“Tell me, Ser Harry,” he demanded, fixing me with that stormy glower that was already famous through the Seven Kingdoms, “what do you know of heresy?”

That threw me. I attended Divine Office and did my bit to help my father support the village septon because it was expected of me, but that was as far as my involvement with the Faith went. If there was one thing I didn’t want, it was the Seven taking a personal interest in my affairs. “Not much, Your Grace,” I replied, using my best ‘bluff-and-hearty’ voice, the one that makes me sound twenty years older and much more wine-steeped than I actually am. “Don’t have much truck with heretics, you see. Don’t get many of them around my lands.”

Stannis nodded. “Perhaps not,” he said, “but our brother Robert’s realm of Myr seems to have an infestation of them, according to the High Septon. It seems that the chief septon the Most Devout sent with the Sunset Company, one Jonothor by name, has broken with doctrine regarding,” he drew a note out of his pocket, “the sole authority of the Seven, the exclusivity of salvation, the primacy of the Great Sept of Baelor, and a variety of other minor offenses.” He pocketed the note. “The High Septon has already ordered this Jonothor’s defrocking and excommunication, and commanded him to sail here to stand trial before the Most Devout. Jonothor, it appears, was willing to do so, but Robert prevented him, on the grounds that the government of the Faith in Myr was his prerogative and no one else’s.” A corner of Stannis’s mouth twitched in a slight hint of a smile. “Judging by what reports we have received, Robert has declared that he finds no reason to prevent Jonothor from continuing in his duties as a septon and ordered him to continue in those duties, regardless of the High Septon’s commands to the contrary. His Holiness, we are told, was wroth when the news reached him.”
I only barely managed to restrain myself from whistling. I had known that Robert was a braw loon, to use the Northern phrase, but never in a hundred years would I have imagined that he would throw down the gauntlet to the Faith. The only king to do that had been Maegor, and things hadn’t ended well for him. Even Aerys had never attempted to confront the Faith and he had been literally raving mad by the end, or so I had heard.

“Five days ago,” Stannis continued, “we received a petition from His Holiness requesting that we employ every means within our power to bring Jonothor to justice and expunge his heresy, as is our duty under Jaehaerys’s law. Now we are fully aware of our duties and obligations, especially to the Faith, but we wish to be certain that we are fully justified in exercising our power in this instance. It would be an ill thing if we were to put a man in peril of his life on groundless charges.”

I blinked. “Your pardon, Your Grace, but aren’t the charges sufficiently grounded already?” I asked. “I mean, if this Jonothor fellow has already been excommunicated then surely the Most Devout had evidence . . .”

“They did, but it was very poor evidence,” said the wizened septon. “The septon they sent to investigate Jonothor’s heresy made a terrible hash of his report; any good canon lawyer can poke a dozen holes in the first page alone. No, a proper investigation, starting from first principles, is called for.”

“And it were better also that we think carefully before taking any irrevocable measures,” Lord Arryn said, looking more like a grumpy old eagle than usual. “Robert holds this Jonothor in very high esteem, we are told. If Robert were to take it into his head that Jonothor was being persecuted to the point of death without cause, all for the sake of the High Septon’s bile . . .” He shrugged. “The last time Robert lost someone he cared for, he abdicated the Iron Throne in order to pursue the feud. I doubt he would be able to do something as drastic in this case, but it would be best to take precautions. It is an ill thing when brother fights brother.”

Stannis nodded. “Which is why we shall be dispatching a fact-finding mission to Myr, in order to determine for ourselves the nature, extent, and danger of Jonothor’s heresy, if it exists, and divine the likely reaction if steps were taken to remove him to King’s Landing for trial. Lord Estermont shall head the mission,” the heavyset gentleman in the Estermont colors bowed, “and Septon Martyn shall lead the ecclesiastical investigation.” As the wizened septon bowed, Stannis turned back to me. “Your part, Ser Harry, will be to investigate the sentiment among the chivalry and common soldiers of the Kingdom of Myr towards Jonothor, with a particular eye towards their likely reaction to his arrest and execution. Given the extent to which Robert’s throne rests on his control of his army, it would be foolish to discount that army’s sentiments on this matter.”

That was probably true, but I really didn’t like the direction this conversation had taken. “Me, Your Grace?” I half stammered, trying to make it sound like it was pleased surprise more than shock that was making my voice unsteady. “But I’m a knight, Your Grace, not a, a spy!”

“Spies work clandestinely,” Stannis said inexorably. “There will be nothing clandestine about this mission. You will be operating as credentialed emissaries under my seal.”

Lord Arryn nodded. “Of a certainty it will be far more overt than your service in Pentos,” he chimed in. “No false titles or disguises this time, simply a knight asking questions of other knights out of duty to his king.”

I was almost goggle-eyed by now and my heart was fairly in my shoes, but I knew better than to try and point out the dangers. A fellow like me would be expected to have no care for such things, which goes some way to explaining why so many knights find early graves. And Lord Arryn’s mention of my Pentoshi service had fairly clinched the deal; the sort of daring fellow who could
uncover an assassination plot almost single-handed (barring the involvement of a turncoat or two and a healthy dose of blind luck) wouldn’t blink twice at a simple diplomatic mission to a friendly realm. Or at the very least, it would look damnably out of character if he did. So there was nothing for it but to click my heels, bow, and mutter something about humbly accepting this great trust and honor, etc. etc. etc. Gods, the things I’ve said and done.
Jaime Lannister tilted his head back and sighed deeply. *This*, he was firmly convinced, was the life.

It was a bright summer’s day on the western frontier of the Kingdom of Myr, the breeze off the sea thirty miles distant was keeping the worst of the heat off, and he was the captain-lieutenant of the second cavalry company of the Royal Army of the Kingdom of Myr; which was another way of saying that he commanded fifty of the finest lances in the finest army in the world.

Strictly speaking, of course, his birth entitled him to more, especially since his seven hundred Westerlanders were one of the largest single contingents of Westerosi remaining to the Kingdom of Myr after the Northmen, but he didn’t make any bones about it. For one thing, he was aware that the Blackfish still regarded him with a jaundiced eye due to the ambush he had suffered in Pentos, and the disapproval of Ser Brynden Tully was a fearsome thing. For another, he knew that Ned Stark and King Robert viewed him as a potential sword of the kingdom; his captain-lieutenancy was meant to provide him an apprenticeship under Ser Lyn Corbray, who whatever his other faults was an excellent cavalryman, before taking command of his own company.

How long he would enjoy a full captaincy, of course, was open to debate. Strictly speaking his exile had only four years left to run, and his father would be counting the days until his return and his assumption of the heirship to Casterly Rock. The fact that he didn’t particularly want to sit in the great hall of the Rock and dispense justice, or preside at tourneys without getting to break a lance himself, or haggle with his bannermen and the burghers of Lannisport, would not enter into the old man’s calculations. He was his heir, he could hear his father saying in that grimly final voice of his, and he would inherit the Lordship of Casterly Rock. It was his duty as a Lannister to uphold the family name.

His father, Jaime reflected as he and his men rode down into the shallow valley, had clearly never been young and strong and commanding a half-company of lances on a long patrol along a hostile border. Alright, a potentially hostile border; the Kingdom of Myr was at peace with Tyrosh for the moment. On the other hand, if the Tyroshi chose today to break the Peace of Pentos and began the festivities by ambushing and wiping out a cavalry patrol along the border . . . well, the knowledge that your king would avenge you wouldn’t be of much use to your corpse. All the more reason to act as if you were actually at war, and take the appropriate safeguards.

One of which was riding back down the slope towards him, one of the dozen scouts who made up the vanguard of the patrol. Reaching the bottom in a spray of dirt, he trotted up to Jaime and clapped a fist to his breastplate in salute. “Sir, on the next ridge over there is a party of people on foot,” he reported. “They appear to be men, for the most part, with a few women, and are in some haste.”

“Any armor or weapons?” Jaime asked; weapons might be easily explained, but armor far less so for people evidently intent on crossing the border, which lay along the line of the small river in the next valley over. Armor meant soldiers.

“Only farm implements that we could see, sir,” the scout replied. “Hoes and billhooks for the most part. No armor that we could see.”

Jaime nodded. “Probably runaway slaves, then,” he mused. The Tyroshi border country had been
hit hard by the Great Raid, but Corbray hadn’t been able to burn out all of the Tyroshi border estates. Those outside his line of march had survived, if they had been able to keep their slaves from rebelling. And even those estates that had been burned out had mostly been reclaimed, either by relatives seeking to restore the family fortunes or by adventurers gambling that peace would allow them to reclaim the rich lands of the borders and leverage them into a ticket into the ranks of the magisters. There had been a steady trickle of runaway slaves since, running the gauntlet of cavalry patrols doing much the same thing he was doing, with the added task of keeping the slaves in line. He turned to Ser Addam Marbrand, who was his second-in-command for this patrol. “Up the ridge, but not over the top yet,” he said. “Don’t want to spook them into dithering and getting caught on the wrong side of the border.”

Addam nodded. “Archers and valets to dismount at the top of the ridge?” he asked.

“No, let’s keep everyone mounted for now,” Jaime said. “If they’re not being pursued after all then there’s no point to the men jumping off and on. And if they are being pursued, men on horseback are more intimidating than men on foot, for the most part.” Addam nodded agreement; that last was why the City Watch of Lannisport maintained a hundred mounted men, in order to help manage crowds.

Jaime raised his hand and pumped it up and down twice. “Forward at the trot,” he called, pitching his voice to reach the rest of the patrol but not carry too far. “Stop just under the ridgeline.”

All down the column the spurs went back and the horses spurted forward, nickering in mild remonstrance. The slope was gentle enough, but no one, man or beast, actually likes to run uphill. Upon reaching the ridgeline, Jaime swung down from his horse, handed it off to Harlos, his page, took his far-eye from him with a nod, and poked his head over the top of the ridge to see the people his scouts had mentioned splashing across the small river that marked the border; it was more of a stream really, but it was still one of the larger watercourses in this part of the Disputed Lands. He also saw the party of cavalry under Tyroshi colors that was cresting the far ridgeline. He smirked mirthlessly; he could just imagine the Tyroshi commander’s frustration. Here he was, having chased these runaways for gods knew how long, and they had managed to get free and clear through his very fingers. For the terms of the Peace of Pentos were clear; any slave who made it onto Myrish soil of their own free will was then, thenceforth, and forever free. Free soil makes a man free, as the saying had become. Of course, whether or not the slaver cities respected that was up to them, and more specifically to their soldiers and agents along the border.

“Come on,” Jaime said under his breath, his eye pressed to the lens of his far-eye. “Just let them go, already. They’re over the border, there’s nothing you can do about it, it’s been days since you put your feet up with a decent bottle . . .” Across the valley the Tyroshi captain, easily identifiable by the plumes in his burgonet, waved his arm and his company started down the slope. “Damn,” Jaime said softly, striding back to his horse and remounting. “Helmets and lances, gentlemen!” he called as he handed his far-eye to Harlos. His knights and men-at-arms had been riding in almost all their armor, but no one put on their helmets until they had to; wearing several pounds of steel on your head for extended periods of time invariably lead to a splitting headache. Following his own command he took his sallet helm from Harlos, let him do up the laces under his chin, and accepted a lance. Now fully armored and ready to fight, he raised his voice again. “Knights and squires in charge order, archers, valets, and pages stand ready to dismount and support. Over the top and halfway down the slope, then halt.” He turned to Addam. “Addam, get those people behind us. I don’t want any lack of clarity as to our position.”

Addam bared his teeth. “Yes, sir,” he replied.

Jaime nodded, then turned towards Dallen, his trumpeter. “Forward at the trot, if you please, as
loud as you can.” As the brassy notes rang out, the half-company, now arrayed for battle, trotted over the top of the ridge and started down the opposite slope. The runaway slaves, fleeing from armored men behind them and now seeing armored men ahead of them, stopped dead with despairing cries, but Addam spurred forward with his lance, shouting in Low Valyrian for them to get moving and get behind the horses. As the half-company clattered to a halt halfway down the slope, the runaways, starting to realize that they were not to have their throats cut, dashed behind them, one pausing for a moment to point at Jaime’s black cloak and battered armor before being hustled along, while across the river the Tyroshi finished reining in in some confusion.

Jaime smiled condescendingly as the Tyroshi sorted themselves out; his men had had rather more impetus behind them thanks to their heavier equipment and they had still managed to keep their alignment both on the move and in the process of halting. Eventually the Tyroshi captain spurred forward, raising his empty hand in token of parley. Jaime turned to Harlos, who had kept at his right hand like a good page. “Tell Ser Addam that he has command until I return from the parley,” he said, handing over his lance. At Harlos’ nod he walked his horse the rest of the way down the slope, mimicking the Tyroshi captain’s gesture as he went, until they met in the middle of the river; there was a ford here, which was part of why Jaime’s half-company had been in the area.

“Jaqenno Hotiris,” said the Tyroshi, who judging by his accent and his almost womanishly beautiful features was in fact a Lyseni, “captain-lieutenant, red banda of the Ragged Standard, Army of Tyrosh. I believe you have a few things of ours.”

“Ser Jaime Lannister, captain-lieutenant, second cavalry company of the Royal Army of Myr,” Jaime replied, raising his visor. “And no, we don’t. See, they’re not yours anymore.”

Jaqenno frowned. “Are they not? They are slaves of the magister Donesso Hestaar that do not have his leave to be absent from the estate where they work. We have been trailing them for three days now and have yet to find their collars, so we assume they are still wearing them. That makes them runaway slaves, and ours.”

“They’re on our side of the border, that makes them free and ours,” Jaime retorted. “According to the Peace of Pentos anyway, which unless I am mistaken, this Hestaar signed himself on behalf of the Archon.”

Jaqenno waved his gauntleted hand. “A technicality that we can surely agree to overlook,” he said. “Surely you would not condemn me, a fellow man of arms, to return empty-handed and ashamed by failure?”

“I most certainly would, in order to keep innocent people from being forced back into slavery,” Jaime said, sitting back in his saddle. “Surely you would not force me to be ashamed before my men and my king?”

Jaqenno shrugged, no mean feat in armor. “Not willingly,” he admitted, “but I am, as they say, a man under authority.”

“So am I,” Jaime replied. “Of course, if you want to try and take them back by force then I am willing to accept the challenge, and let the Warrior decide.”

Jaqenno cast a pawky glance up at Jaime’s half-company, almost two hundred and fifty men in full or half-armor, and another back at his own men, almost precisely half that number in lighter armor. “You are pleased to make game of me,” he said drily, “but I must decline. Duty prevents me from wasting the lives of my men in a contest I am doomed to lose.”

Jaime nodded. “Some other time, perhaps?” he suggested.
“We shall see,” Jaqenno replied. “All things are in the hands of the gods.” He bowed shortly in the saddle. “The sele of the day to you, ser.”

“And to you,” Jaime said courteously, noting with some admiration how good Jaqenno’s control was. If he had been bearded by a boy several years his junior he would have been furious. Reining his horse around, he cantered back up the slope, gesturing for the half-company to turn about and ride back over the ridge. As he resumed his place in the column, he passed by the new freedmen, who seemed to have realized that they were to be free after all. A few were dancing as they walked, one or two were weeping openly, and a few had their hands raised in prayer and were noisily calling down the blessings of various gods. One brawny fellow with the arms and shoulders of a blacksmith, spying Jaime, raised his folded hands in salute.

“Black Lion!” he shouted in thickly accented Low Valyrian. “Black Lion and freedom!” As the other freedmen took up the shout Jaime raised a hand in acknowledgement, smiling broadly as he did so. He had first heard men cheer his father at the age of five, during some celebration or other. But he had never heard his father cheered as the freedmen were cheering him now.

XXX

As the door to his private chambers creaked open, the pirate-lord all but leaped to his feet, a genuine smile lighting up his face as he raised his arms. “Davos, my old,” he cried genially, striding forward to meet his guest. “It has been too long, far too long.”

“You always were a flatterer, Salladhor,” Davos replied, meeting the pirate-lord’s embrace with one of his own. “It’s only been five months since our paths crossed.”

“Ah, but between friends, the pain of separation is increased by the love they bear for each other.” Salladhor said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Do you not find it so with your wife?”

Davos waggled his eyebrows. “Why do you think we have four sons?” he asked rhetorically, provoking a belly-laugh from his host. They made for an odd pair, the pirate-lord and the smuggler, sharing only their slender builds and the wrinkles common to every seaman the world over. Salladhor Saan was almost compulsively flamboyant, as seen by the fact that on an evening when he was not holding court among his crew or officially receiving guests he was wearing an exquisitely tailored suit of crimson velvet intricately embroidered with gold thread. By contrast, Davos’s trews, shirt, tunic, and mantle were all of the sort you might find on a minor tradesman who was making ends meet with not much to spare, being simply and sturdily made out of unadorned broadcloth. Where Salladhor was handsome, graceful, suave, and courtly in his manners, Davos was as plain of face as he was of speech and habitually walked with the rolling gait of a lifelong sailor. Even the room they were standing in highlighted the differences between them. Davos’ cabin on the Shadow was spare and very plainly furnished, but Salladhor’s private study was almost the perfect definition of a rich pirate’s lair. The hide of a great snow bear served as a rug, the walls were hung with Myrish tapestries, the desk was a massive specimen of its kind liberally bedecked with Qohorik carvings, and the quill with which Salladhor had been writing had originally graced the wing of a Sothoryan parrot.

Yet despite their differences, or perhaps because of them, Salladhor and Davos were not simply business partners, but good friends. As proved when Salladhor gestured at his butler, who had continued to stand in the doorway. “Bring wine and food, man!” he cried. “And girls, too! Only the best for my friend!” He cocked an eyebrow at Davos. “You still prefer girls, yes?”

“I do, but I’m afraid that I’m here on business, not pleasure,” Davos replied regretfully. “And it’s the sort of business that cannot be discussed where other ears can hear it.”
Salladhor searched Davos’ face for a moment, and then turned back to his butler. “Leave us,” he commanded, suddenly serious. “And let none disturb us until we call.” As the butler bowed away and closed the door after himself, Davos and Salladhor sat down on a pair of richly upholstered chairs that Salladhor had taken from a Volantene pleasure barge. “Is it that you have found a score that you need help mastering, my friend?” Salladhor asked. “Speak, and we shall find a way to make it possible.”

“I have a score all right,” Davos answered, “but it’s one of the easiest I’ve ever come across. My employer handed it to me himself.”

Salladhor’s eyebrows shot up towards his hairline. “Employer?” he asked delicately.

Davos nodded. “I am instructed to convey to you the warm regards and great esteem of His Grace King Robert of Myr.”

Salladhor nodded back. “Ah, so,” he said wonderingly. “Sits the wind in that corner, then, my old?”

“It does,” Davos replied, reaching into a pocket of his tunic. “If I had my way, I’d have stayed out of it, and if Ironmaker had lived he might have let me, but Victarion Greyjoy insisted on introducing me to King Robert. And let me tell you, my friend, when an Ironborn captain half again your size puts his hand on your shoulder and says he will introduce you to his king, you get introduced to his king.” As Salladhor chuckled at the mental image thus invoked, Davos drew out a scroll. “I was also instructed to convey this to you,” he went on, handing it over. “A King’s Commission, declaring you and your ships to be a detached auxiliary squadron of the Royal Fleet of Myr.”

Salladhor shook his head pityingly as he accepted the scroll. “Davos, my old, you of all people should know that I have sworn to be no man’s servant, while I can yet sail a ship and swing a sword.”

“Less a servant and more an ally, in this case,” Davos said, nodding to acknowledge the point. “In the event of war against Lys or Tyrosh, or both, you would be requested to do all in your power to harm their shipping and their commerce. You and your ships would be able to reprovision in Myrish ports, call on other ships of the Royal Fleet for aid, and keep all the legitimate plunder you take.”

Salladhor raised an eyebrow. “Is it to be war, then?” he asked.

Davos spread his hands. “My friend, you know as well as I that the Peace of Pentos is no more meant to be a permanent peace than it is meant to turn lead into gold. The insults and the wounds there go too deep for any piece of paper to heal, much less one that King Robert was all but forced into signing. He wears the coins that Donesso and Brachio gave him in reparation on a chain around his neck, you know, to remind himself of the insult they offered to him.”

Salladhor nodded. “And in return for my aid, Robert requires what?”

“Only that you free every slave you currently hold,” Davos replied, “and transport any slaves you take from the enemy to Myr for emancipation.”

Salladhor tapped the scroll against his chin for a moment, then tossed it on the small table between them and stood. “Come, my friend, and read a chart with me;” he invited, going over to his desk and pulling a chart from a nearby rack. As Davos joined him he unrolled it to show the southern Narrow Sea. “Consider my position, here, my old,” he said rhetorically. “To the west I have the
Seven Kingdoms, to whom I am naught but a slave-taking pirate. To the north and the northeast I have the Braavosi, who would gladly keelhaul me under my own ship before hanging my carcass from the Titan’s kilt by the ankles. In Myr I have a pack of fanatics who, for the dubious benefit of their friendship, demand that I surrender a sizable percentage of my wealth and forswear any chance of recovering it. In Tyrosh and Lys, on the other hand, I have old foes who would like very much to hang me, but who may swallow their distaste when they remember the strength of my ships and the skill of my men.” He spread his hands. “What is a poor corsair to do in such a situation? I ask you to set aside your prejudice against slavery, my friend, and answer dispassionately.”

Davos shrugged. “I would still counsel you to ally with the Kingdom of Myr,” he said. “King Robert is not a man of business, as we are, but he is a man of his word. Unlike some in Tyrosh and Lys that I could name, like that one harbormaster.”

“May he rot in the deepest of your seven hells with worms gnawing his balls,” Salladhor said, his mellifluous voice darkening. He and Davos had both lost a great deal of money on account of that harbormaster. “But at least the Archon and the Conclave will not demand that I beggar myself for the privilege of becoming an isolated and unsupported ally. If I declare for the Kingdom of Myr,” he gestured at the chart again, “then I place myself in a ring of mortal enemies, of which at least two-thirds know these islands as intimately as you and I. Whereas if I cast my lot with Lys and Tyrosh, then I will secure my position in these islands for some time yet. Even if the Braavosi fleet sails south to sweep the seas, I much doubt that they will be able to defeat Lys, Tyrosh, and myself, all at the same time.”

“They might still win, though,” Davos said. “And if Lys and Tyrosh can gain a peace by throwing you to the Braavosi, you know they will. They’ve suffered your raids as much as the Braavosi have.”

“A chance I am willing to take, knowing coves and bays that even the Braavosi do not,” Salladhor said. “And if I were to cast my lot with King Robert and accept impoverishment, what would he do if the Braavosi demanded my head in return for their continued support of his treasury? He might swear an oath to me if I become his man, but he would still have an oath to his people.” He shook his head. “I am not the most merciful of men, but I am merciful enough to spare a man that decision.”

Davos nodded slowly. Put that way he could certainly see Salladhor’s logic, even if it burned at him to admit it. “This is your final answer then?” he asked.

“It is,” Salladhor replied, his face sad. “I am sorry, my old, but we must choose different roads henceforth.”

Davos nodded again. “If you’re ever captured,” he said, “I’ll testify on your behalf. I don’t have much influence, but Victarion and his Ironborn owe me a debt for guiding Ironmaker’s fleet to them, and Ser Gerion Lannister has acknowledged that the Crown also owes me for that.”

Salladhor laughed, half in genuine amusement and half in bitterness. “Ye of little faith,” he said jestingly. “Am I not Salladhor Saan, the prince of the Narrow Sea, who was dodging or slaying his pursuers before he had hair on his balls?”

“You are, but times are changing, Salladhor,” Davos said earnestly. “I first felt it on Bloodstone when I stood before Ironmaker, and again when the Ironborn fought the Tyroshi fleet. There’s a new wind brewing, and unless we trim our sails to ride it we’ll get driven under.”

Salladhor shrugged. “Then I will die as I have lived, a free sailor and no man’s servant,” he said
simply. “In any case, if I did not make a habit of rolling the dice, I would still be a deckhand, and not the master of twenty keels with a name known from White Harbor to Astapor. I will take my chances.” He extended his hand to Davos. “Will you accept my hospitality for the night at least, before sailing back to Myr?”

“Of course,” Davos said, taking his old friend’s hand in a firm clasp, blinking back a sudden itch in his eyes. “If this is to be our last night as friends, then let us celebrate old times before we part ways.”

“Spoken like a true brother of the coast,” Salladhor said, clapping Davos on the shoulder.
Peace was Never an Option

Lyn Corbray prided himself on having a strong stomach. Well, if you wanted to be a knight you had to be able to ignore the smell of freshly-spilled blood and the even worse smell of perforated bowels. Nor could you let the sight of what lay under a man’s skin put you off your stride. Not if you wanted to keep your own guts where they belonged, anyway. There was a reason that knights, and other men-at-arms, tended to a certain hard-edged indifference to carnage.

That being said, there were certain things that could make even the staunchest stomach rebel. For instance, the scene that Lyn and his half-company had found while on patrol.

It wasn’t the scale of the massacre that was making veteran knights hurriedly dismount and bend over; as far as Lyn could tell, there were thirteen or fourteen corpses clustered in the little swale and no more. Nor was it the fact that they had all, quite obviously, died extremely violent deaths; men who had fought at Tara, the Siege of Myr, the Great Raid, and Narrow Run were no strangers to the forms that violent death took. Even the smell wasn’t as bad as any of those battles; fourteen corpses just didn’t compare to several thousand, even after a day and a half in the slightly damp heat of the Disputed Lands in high summer.

But even a man who had been disemboweled was still more or less in one piece. The people who had been killed here in this nameless little depression in the grasslands along the border had not just been killed, but savaged, so that of the thirteen or fourteen dead bodies, not one of them was intact. Lyn swallowed his gorge with some difficulty and turned to Ser Joren Potts, who had been posted to his company a month after the war as part of Stark and Tully’s reorganization of the army. The fresh-faced younger knight was almost as cold-blooded as Lyn himself was sometimes, but he had soft spots still. Lyn could tell.

“Runaway slaves, I imagine,” he said, forcing his voice to remain level; it would not do for his men to see him undone. One of the pillars on which their esteem of him rested, after all, was his ability to keep his countenance even under such conditions as these.

Joren nodded jerkily. “Some of them are still wearing collars,” he said woodenly, gesturing at one corpse that had kept its head. “Tyroshi patrol must have followed them over the border, caught up to them.”

Lyn gave his own nod. “They fought back though,” he said, gesturing at a severed arm lying near his charger’s left fore-hoof. “See there, the cuts along the forearm and the broken nails? Whoever that belonged to went hand-to-hand against someone with a weapon. That must have made them angry.”

“And they vented that anger on their victims,” Joren finished, staring fixedly at the beheaded corpse of a woman; Lyn followed his gaze and hurriedly looked away. He knew himself to be a hard man, but the ruin between that corpse’s legs was not something that he needed in his memories. Joren signed himself with the seven-pointed star, his hand shaking. “Father have mercy, Mother have mercy,” he said, his voice starting to tremble. “I thought I knew what the slavers were like after the coast, but this . . .”

“Was probably the work of an exile banda,” Lyn said, interrupting Joren before he began to babble. “Sellswords might have committed the rape, but not the dismemberment; their pay isn’t based on
how many pieces they cut their victims into and cutting people apart like this is hard to do, both for the muscles and the mind. If anything, they would have cut off their heads to take them back and show that their work was done.” Lyn shook his head. “This wasn’t done by professionals; this is amateur’s work.” As Lyn spoke a vulture began to glide downwards towards the pile of bodies, and was shot out of the sky by an archer who proceeded to march over to the avian’s carcass and retrieve his arrow with rather more force than was strictly necessary, casting aspersions on the vulture’s parentage, diet, and sexual preferences as he did so.

Joren gulped noisily, twice, and then visibly mastered himself. “I’ll organize a party of archers to dig a grave for these people,” he said hoarsely. “We don’t have a septon with us, but we can spare them from the scavengers at least.”

Lyn nodded. “Make it so, on my authority,” he said in his command voice; he didn’t hold much with sentiment, but there was something to be said for not giving the predators around here a free supper. The Disputed Lands had been long-settled, but along the borders the population had been kept relatively light by the wars, with the result that the borderlands were rich with game, and the predators who fed both on them and the corpses that the wars left behind. The wolves here were not as large as they were in the Vale, Lyn would swear, but he had never seen wolves with less fear of men. “In the meanwhile, I will be writing a report to King Robert. He must know of this.”

XXX

The four Tyroshi captains were well pleased with themselves as they sat in the private room of the Pied Merlin, the finest tavern and boardinghouse on the Myrish waterfront. They had taken a gamble on being the first Tyroshi merchants to breach the unofficial embargo that had been placed upon the Kingdom of Myr by the Archon and the Lyseni conclave, and so far that gamble was paying off handsomely. They had received permission to trade from Lord Captain of the Port Franlan, their cargoes were all safely warehoused, and they were already receiving handsome offers for their dyes, pear brandy, and mechanical devices and curios. They had, they agreed over bowls of rich seafood stew and glasses of quite good wine, done well to remember that, despite the war and the grudges it had spawned, business was business.

Of course, they still had to take precautions. Ordinarily they would have eaten in the common room to spare their purses the expense of a private room, but they had received enough black looks from the populace to decide to keep out of sight as much as possible. Even a tavern with a repute as good as the Pied Merlin produced drunkards and men flown with drink were far more prone to violence than men in full possession of their reason. But all in all, they had been pleasantly surprised; far from the seething cesspool of the unchained rabble barely held in check by Andal slayers that Rumor had portrayed, Myr city was almost as busy and vibrant as it had been before the siege and sack. The rules of the great game of trade had changed of course, but it seemed that there was still room for sensible and rational men of business to make a living, or even a fortune.

Their good humor was put to a sudden end when the door slammed open and six heavily armored men, two belted knights and four men-at-arms, strode in. One of the captains stood from his chair and blustered a demand for an explanation, only to have one of the men-at-arms put his hands on his shoulders and drive him back down onto his chair so hard that his buttocks were bruised. The other three captains, seeing their fellow thusly manhandled, remained in their seats and kept their hands in plain view, carefully not reaching for their eating knives. Whatever this was, they thought among themselves, it was surely something that could be settled without any bloodshed. They were in a public place after all, and the Kingdom of Myr prided itself on the strength of its laws.

These hopes were substantially deflated by the arrival of a seventh man in heavy armor, whose white surcoat with its grey direwolf sigil was pinned at the shoulder with a brooch in the shape of a
clenched gauntlet. There were stories about Lord Eddard Stark, and the liberties that King Robert allowed his Fist.

“By order of His Grace King Robert,” Lord Stark proclaimed in a terribly final voice, “you men are under arrest.”

“On what grounds?” the captain who had tried to stand demanded to know as he tried to sit as lightly as possible.

“On the grounds that nine days ago, fourteen citizens of this kingdom were massacred by a Tyroshi cavalry patrol,” Lord Stark replied, fixing each of the captains with his iron-eyed glower. “His Grace has already sent to Tyrosh demanding that the guilty ones be handed over to face the Crown’s justice. In the meantime, you and your men will be lodged in the Palace of Justice as guests of His Grace. In order to pay for your maintenance, your cargos will be impounded and sold at public auction; any monies not so used by the time of your release will be disbursed to you.”

The three elder captains looked at each other and shrugged. On the face of it, it wasn’t the worst proposition in the world. At least there was a chance for them to make some money out of this sudden misfortune; their goods were not being seized as much as held in trust, when looked at from a certain point of view. More importantly, it seemed they weren’t to be killed out of hand. The presence of the King’s Fist was as good an indication as any that they were being viewed as enemies of the Kingdom of Myr, but apparently the sword was merely being loosened in its scabbard, not drawn and swung.

“The hell you say!” the fourth and youngest of the captains suddenly blurted out, surging half to his feet before the man-at-arms standing behind him drove him back down into his seat. “This is barefaced theft!” he spluttered, headdress of the gauntlets holding his shoulders. “Is your king so craven he must send his dog to do his stealing for him?!”

“Damn it, Laziros, shut up!” said one of the other three captains, who turned to Lord Stark. “I apologize for my brother-in-law, Lord Stark. He is too easily angered.”

“Evidently,” Lord Stark said calmly. “Your apology is accepted. And your dinners are paid for; I shall make arrangements with the keeper. Now, gentles, if you will come with us, we have a carriage waiting for you.”

Laziros opened his mouth again, only shutting it after his brother-in-law seized his wrist in an iron grip and joined the other two captains in glaring him into deflating. Slowly the four captains stood from their chairs, allowing their captors to take the swordbelts that they had hung on the backs of their chairs, and followed Lord Stark through the busily murmuring common room out to the carriage.

XXX

The Archon of Tyrosh kept his expression carefully neutral as the herald finished reading out the demand from King Robert. One of the burdens of being a ruler, of any stripe, was that one was more or less barred from showing strong emotion in public, in order to maintain the dignity of one’s office.

His councilors had fewer such inhibitions. No sooner had the Archon waved the herald out of the room than Councilor Varoros slammed his fist on the table. “By the gods, the impertinence,” the white-haired old battler spat, his lined face a picture of barely-restrained anger. “That an upjumped, beer-swilling barbarian whoremonger should speak to men such as us as if we were slaves, to bend over on command.”
“He might simply be posturing,” said Councilor Jaqaquo. “I have dealt with Andals in positions of power before and every one of them was simply enamored of theatrics.”

“You don’t carve out a kingdom at the sword’s edge by theatrics,” replied Councilor Stallar, before turning towards the Archon. “My lord, I fear that we must take King Robert at his word,” he said earnestly. “And unless we are entirely ready to accept the wager of battle, we should give serious consideration to meeting his demands.”

Varoros glared at his fellow councilor. “Have you lost your balls?” he demanded bluntly. “Or are you that eager to bare your arse to the barbarians? My lord,” he went on, turning to the Archon as Stallar purpled in rage, “throw their herald out, I beg you. Or better yet, send him back to the barbarians in a coffin. We are not bound to follow the conventions of diplomacy when dealing with people who break them so readily.”

“Are you finally losing your wits along with the last of your teeth?” Councilor Innennos spat. “The Andals hate us already. If we kill a herald under flag of truce, then they will sow this city with salt.”

“Assuming that they take the city at all,” Varoros snapped. “I have more faith in our army and our fleet than to consider that a possibility.”

Stallar was on the verge of exploding into fury when the Archon, having made up his mind, raised his hand, stilling all conversation. Even Varoros sat back in his chair. “Gentlemen,” the Archon began, “we find ourselves in a quandary. On the one hand we are threatened with the loss of our lives and our property, which we must by no means risk lightly. We each of us have a duty to our sons and grandsons to leave them a patrimony as great as that which our fathers and grandfathers gave to us. On the other hand, we are threatened with the loss of our honor, which is the greater danger. We know well, gentlemen, what the Kingdom of Myr intends to do to us, in the fullness of time. Is there any man here who truly believes, in his heart of hearts, that to yield to the barbarians will do more than whet their appetites for ever more of our lifeblood?”

Every man around the table shook their heads. They had heard the reports of their spies in the Kingdom of Myr, especially those who managed to listen in on the conversations of the Kingdom’s infernal Legion. They made for chilling reading. Even worse had been the stories of the Sack of Myr, and especially the barbarities that had taken place in the Palace of Order. There were families, the Archon knew, who had sworn to either die fighting or else commit collective suicide in order to forestall being victimized as the Myrish had been.

The Archon shook his own head. “Beyond even the loss of our honor,” he continued, “is the loss of the fear our slaves have for us that would result from a surrender to the barbarians. I pray, gentlemen, that none of us here are so foolish as to believe that our slaves obey our commands out of love for us. No, if they obey it is because they fear, and rightly, the punishments our law prescribes for a rebellious slave. But if we once give them cause to doubt our firmness and our courage, then that doubt will be as a spray of embers cast upon damp tinder. The majority may extinguish themselves and never take hold, but some few will find a dry place, and the tinder will begin to smolder. And we will be forced to run from ember to ember, stamping them out one by one as the smoke rises, all the while praying that we never miss even one, lest the whole pile of tinder burst into flame beneath our feet.”

The Archon swept his councilors with a steely gaze. “Therefore,” he said, “we are not only well-advised, but compelled to defy King Robert’s demand, and pray that it is the bluff it appears to be. It is true, that our defiance may provoke a war that will destroy us. But if we bend the knee to his demands, then we will have traded a quick and clean death by the sword for a slow and inglorious
end, wasting away like a pox victim, until we die, raving and impotent, overwhelmed by corruption.” The Archon raised a clenched fist. “If we must fall, gentlemen,” he said, his voice building, “then let us fall like men!”

The councilors, their bickering swept aside by having their choices laid out for them so starkly, thumped the table in the traditional symbol of agreement and acclamation.

The defiance of the Tyroshi reached Myr a sennight later and sparked an immediate response. The ravens flew that very evening, summoning the Royal Army to its assembly areas. For the third time in as many years, war had come to the Disputed Lands.

- *Chasing Dragons: The Sunset Company Reexamined* by Maester Hendricus, published 1539 AC
Wolf House, as Lord and Lady Stark’s manse in Myr city was known, was cheerful enough as official residences went. It was sparsely decorated, thanks to Lord Eddard’s spartan tastes and Lady Amarya’s frugality, but it made up for the lack of ornament with a reputation for hospitality; the two parties that the Starks had officially hosted, one for the Northmen that had followed Maege Mormont back to Essos and another for the officers of the local companies of the Iron Legion, had been great successes, and the rumors had spread in the telling.

Today however the cheerfulness had vanished. The army was assembling to march for the border, and the King’s Fist was in the final stages of preparing to take leave of his wife. The whole house seemed to have caught the grim mood, but nowhere more so than in the solar where Lord Stark was arming.

Saul tightened the last strap on Eddard’s armor, ran a buffing cloth over the surface of the metal to remove any smudges from his fingers, swiped a minute flake of dust from one of the linked steel plates of Eddard’s sword belt, and stepped back. “All well, my lord?” he asked.

Eddard slowly swung his arms in exaggerated circles, raised his knees up towards his chest, and twisted and bent at the waist, the plates of his armor sliding over each other with a metallic rustling. “Very well indeed,” he replied. “Thank you, Saul.”

Saul, already armored in brigandine, plate arm and leg harness, and a gorget, bowed his head and reached for Eddard’s arming cap; Eddard forestalled him with a gesture. “The rest can wait,” he said, “we’ll not be fighting today.” Saul nodded and tucked Eddard’s arming cap and gauntlets into his bascinet, snatched up his own half-helm and gauntlets, and bowed his way out of the room. As he did so, Amarya rose from her chair by the window and joined Eddard in the center of the room, where she drew a brown lace out of her pocket and began to wrap it around Eddard’s left rerebrace.

“Remember when we first met?” she asked with a slight smile as she tied off the knot that would hold it in place.

Eddard nodded. “As one who was walking in darkness remembers first seeing the light,” he said, taking his wife’s hands. “I thought it made me a better warrior, to have nothing to live for beyond vengeance,” he went on, running his thumb over Amarya’s wedding ring. “But if that is so, then why is my arm stronger and my sword swifter at the thought of never seeing you again?”

Amarya’s eyes searched Eddard’s face. “Perhaps because now you have a reason not only to not die, but to live,” she replied. “And with it, the hope that there may be a life for you after the death of the Targaryens.”

“Or perhaps the songs are right in this much, that love makes a man better than he was before,” Eddard said, meeting Amarya’s gaze. “The gods know that I have slept better in your arms than I ever did before, since the rebellion.” He drew his wife into a careful embrace; the strength of his arms and the rigidity of his breastplate meant that it would not be difficult for him to accidentally crack Amarya’s ribs. It was one of the downsides of knightly training that the strength to wield sword and lance through a long day of fighting was also the sort of strength that made it easy to break things if you weren’t careful.

“I will return,” he said when he finally broke the embrace. “And if any damned slavers try to stop
me, they will not live to regret it.”

Amarya smiled. “Oh, I am sure that they will regret it,” she said, a slight edge of humor in her voice. “Briefly, perhaps, but no less deeply.” After she and Eddard had stopped chuckling, she raised a hand to her husband’s face, her expression turning grave. “Safe into battle, safe out of battle,” she intoned softly, “and safe return from the strife. Come back to me, love.”

“Though all the hells bar the way,” Eddard replied, raising Amarya’s hand to his lips and kissing her wedding ring.

XXX

Daario Naharis blew his lips out in a sigh of relief. He had been assured that the fleet could fight off any attempt by the Ironborn to interdict the passage of the soldiers stationed on Tyrosh isle to the mainland, but he had still spent the short voyage in a state of nervousness. He had been a sellsword for twelve years now, and one of the lessons that had been engraved on his heart in letters of steel in those years was to never take an assurance at face value. Only fellow members of the company were exempted from that mandate of skepticism.

Fortunately, the fleet had kept its word, and the passage from Tyrosh isle to Aesica had been unmolested by the Myrish navy. The need to keep a substantial garrison on the isle had reduced the number of reinforcements that could be sent to the mainland, but even with that limitation Daario had three thousand infantry under his hand, half of them newly landed from Tyrosh isle, along with a thousand cavalry. Those had already been waiting for him on the fields outside Aesica; cavalry needed space and grazing, neither of which was possible to find on the island of Tyrosh, covered from shore to shore as it was by the city.

Daario tore his eyes away from the organized chaos of the encamped army and turned his gaze inland. *Five days to raise, organize, and transport the forces from the isle,* he mused, remembering the haste and tumult of those days; he had not slept more than three or four hours a night in all that time. *A day or two to land those forces and integrate them with the ones already here.* *Eight or nine days to march from Aesica to Alalia, picking up militia and regular companies along the way and meeting the Ragged Standard at Alalia.* And then *six or seven days to the border.* Barring unforeseen setbacks, he spat aside and touched the wood of his saddle’s pommel reflexively, *we should be over the border on the thirty-third day of the war at the latest.* Not bad. Hard luck on the border estates, who would have no defense against any invaders for at least two or three days according to the most favorable calculations of the Archon’s logisticians, but the interior, with its broad-acre farms that fed the city, the mines that fueled its workshops, and the seaport towns that funneled the raw materials of the mainland to Tyrosh isle, would be protected.

And that was the overarching impulse behind Daario’s orders as Captain-General of the Army of Tyrosh. *Protect the interior. If you can trap the Myrish army and destroy it, then by all means, but hold them at bay if it is the last thing you do.* The Archon and his Council had decided to adopt a conservative strategy against the Kingdom of Myr. The political situation of the Kingdom of Myr, it had been explained to Daario, was such that in order to maintain internal stability it had to push ever further outwards to conquer new territories in the name of abolition. If that impulse to foreign conquest was successfully stymied, then it was entirely possible that the Kingdom of Myr could fall apart in fratricidal recriminations over King Robert’s failure to uphold his coronation oath to destroy slavery. If that came to pass, then steps could be taken to exploit the divisions, but in order to bring those divisions about the Kingdom of Myr had to be defeated, the more resoundingly the better.

Daario pursed his lips, remembering the ferocity of the combat at Tara, where all his old notions
about combat had been stood on their heads. *A fine thing to say, 'defeat the enemy',* he thought to himself. *But no one ever seems to consider that the enemy gets a say in the matter.* He would do his utmost, of course, that went without saying. And not simply out of professional pride, either; he had forsworn his allegiance to Tyrosh when he took up the life of a sellsword, but the past several months had rekindled his fondness for his homeland. He had a respectable army to do that utmost with, he had a moderately formidable ally in the Lyseni who were supposed to draw off forces from any invading army by harrying the southern frontier of the Kingdom of Myr, and he had a decent strategic position to work with. But for all that, he couldn’t help but feel a trickle of foreboding from worming into his guts.

Especially since he had never played for stakes this high before, with his own money or anyone else’s. In the Stormcrows he had been only a lieutenant, if a senior and influential lieutenant; he had never commanded more than a hundred men at once. Now he was set to command anywhere from ten to fifteen thousand men, with a kingdom for the stakes. Victory would propel him to heights he had never dreamed of ascending, but if he lost . . . there were plenty of men in Tyrosh, powerful and influential men, who would happily see him disemboweled for being promoted over the heads of men who had never wavered in their loyalty to the city. Councilor Varoros, for one, had publicly averred that nothing good could come of entrusting the defense of the city to an upjumped sellsword who had only lately rediscovered his loyalty to the city that had birthed him.

Daario spat aside again. *Fuck you too, councilor,* he thought viciously. *As if I didn’t have enough problems with the enemy.*

Of course, if he won then Varoros would have to eat his words, without salt. If he lost, however, he would be the man who had pissed away the main army of the city and almost certainly lost it the war. Tyrosh had other forces than the ones under Daario’s command, but very few that could actually take the field. The towns required substantial garrisons in order to be able to hold the walls against a siege and the streets against the slaves, while every estate owner on the mainland howled as long and as loud as he could for frequent and strong patrols across their lands to keep their slaves in line. For all practical purposes, Daario’s army was the only one Tyrosh had and if he lost it there would not be another one for at least a year, if not two or three years.

Daario shook his head forcefully, trying to drive the thoughts out of his head. Just do all you can and let Lady Fortune handle the rest, old son, he reminded himself. But he still couldn’t make the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach go away.

**XXX**

_The following is an excerpt from Flash for the Faith! by George Dand_

The voyage to Myr went well enough, largely thanks to the fact that I’ve never been prone to seasickness and the captain kept a reasonably good table. Lord Estermont was a decent sort, one of your bluff, hearty fellows who get more expansive in physique and manner as they age; Lord Estermont being fifty years old, he was a barrel-chested ogre of a man with a booming laugh and a handshake like a vise. Septon Martyn I found less congenial; he was the sort of person who knows that he is the smartest person in any given room on his particular subject and can’t help but demonstrate it when given occasion. If he hadn’t been such a decent fellow, and if he hadn’t had such a good sense of humor, I’d have been sorely tempted to kick him overboard. Not that I would have anyway; I didn’t know what his history was, but any man with the credentials to get sent on a mission like this was sure to have friends in high places who would take a very sharply pointed interest if he came to an unexplained end.

In any case we landed in Myr city only to find that Robert and Septon Jonothor had both gone. It
seemed that in the time we had been crossing the Narrow Sea war had broken out between the
Kingdom of Myr on one side and Tyrosh on the other, with Lys supposedly set to join the Tyroshi
due to their treaty. Robert was marching south-east to muster an army at the town of Sirmium, and
Jonothor had gone with him to minister to the Seven-worshippers among the troops. Ser Gerion
Lannister, who as Hand of the King had been left in command in Robert’s absence, invited us to
take up lodging in the Palace of Justice, but Lord Estermont wouldn’t hear it. “What,” he had
bellowed, “loll at my ease while my grandson faces the enemy?! Be damned if I will! Follow me,
sers!” Not three hours later we had acquired horses (of indifferent quality it must be said; all the
good ones had gone with the army) and were clattering out of the gates onto the road.

Say what you like about Lord Estermont, he could shift when he had a mind to; we must have
covered twenty miles that day alone, and for each of the nine days afterward we averaged fifteen
or twenty miles, riding at the trot for an hour and then walking for an hour to give our horses a
breather. By the time we reached Sirmium I was worn almost to a nub from fatigue; how Septon
Martyn endured it I can’t imagine, unless the gods had decided to give one of their own a helping
hand. Even Lord Estermont was looking a little grey around the gills. Even so, he still had enough
energy to roar introductions at the sentries who challenged our approach and demand to be taken to
see Robert immediately. I suppose going to fat around the middle gives you some reserves to draw
on.

The sentries were a suspicious lot, infantry in heavy spearman’s kit and evidently keenly aware of
their responsibilities. Only their corporal was able to read Common Tongue and that slowly, but he
managed to puzzle through the letter from King Stannis establishing our bonafides and told off a
pair of his men to escort us; as we left some wag among the sentries shouted “Enjoy the show!” to
which Lord Estermont asked him what the devil he meant only to be waved off with a “You’ll
see!” And by the gods we didn’t have to wait long to see what he meant, though we heard it long
before we saw it. First it was a sporadic braying of trumpets and lowing of horns, then a thunder of
hooves and a rumble of marching feet, and then we topped the rise to see one of the most fearsome
spectacles of our time, the drawn sword of abolition and the terror of the slaver cities: the Iron
Legion.

Now in my time, I’ve had to become something of a connoisseur of armies (not by choice, mark
you; if I had my way, I’d never have left the Crownlands), and I’ve never succumbed to the belief
that some breeds of men make naturally better soldiers. As Stannis himself once put it, there are no
bad soldiers, only bad captains. So when I say that the Grand Army of Volantis was bigger, the
Great Armament more awe-inspiring in its way, and that there’s a special place in my nightmares
for the sight of thirty thousand Dothraki screamers at the charge, you can take it as the sober and
considered opinion of an (unwilling) expert. But for sheer military power I’ve seen nothing outside
Westeros or Braavos and damned little in them to match the Iron Legion. It wasn’t a question of
numbers; as far as I know, the Iron Legion never mustered more than thirty thousand foot and ten
thousand horse in one place. Nor was it a matter of visual splendor; the Iron Legion was one of the
drabbest armies I have ever seen. What really took my breath away was the discipline and the
systematic order of them; every man wore near enough to the same equipment, depending on what
class of soldier they were, as made no difference, they stood in close-ordered ranks and marched in
step, and every mess group of every company moved in almost perfect unison at the word of
command, like bees in a swarm or swallows in a flock. The Iron Legion wasn’t a collection of
lordly retinues, urban militias, and sellsword bands, each with their own allegiances, rivalries, and
agendas, like most armies in the world, they were something entirely different. What we were
looking at was more than a hundred mechanisms bound in nigh-perfect obedience into a single
machine, obedient to a single brain and driven by a single force. This, we would come to realize,
was an army.

The first thing I thought when I made sense of what I was seeing was ‘Thank all the gods we don’t
have slavery in Westeros, because we’d never be able to beat this lot.’ Even after more than forty years there are a score of images in my head from that field as fresh as if I saw them yesterday: a company of lances wheeling at the canter with not a single horse more than an inch out of alignment that I could see; a hundred or so longbowmen shooting cheap clay saucers out of the air like ducks for the pot before turning on the butts and loosing a scorcher of a volley that turned every bulls-eye into a hedgehog; a banda of light horse transitioning from loose scouting order to close ranks at a single trumpet call; and most terrifying of all, a heavy infantry company deploying from column of march to line of battle without missing a step, the spearmen crouching down and shuffling forward as the crossbows loosed over their advancing heads into a double row of wooden dummies, and then at the shriek of a whistle the spearmen rearing up and plunging forward with a roar of “Free or dead!” to overrun the dummies with spears flashing and damn me if their ranks weren’t as straight as a carpenter’s rule even at the charge, the shields a perfect wall of iron-rimmed wood tipped with a hedge of spear-points.

Next to me Lord Estermont was signing himself with the seven-pointed star with a dumbstruck expression on his face, while Septon Martyn’s jaw was gaping open as he stared. I don’t know what they were thinking, but I was thinking that I wouldn’t give a single clipped penny for Tyrosh’s chances if they tried to fight this crowd. If the companies I was seeing at drill here were representative of the whole army and if they worked together as well as they did alone, then the Tyroshi would get eaten alive. The second thing I thought was that it didn’t matter what Septon Martyn found regarding Jonothor’s heresy, we’d never be able to try him for it unless Robert let us. So long as Robert protected him, and had this army to back him up, Jonothor was as safe as any man in the world.

I should have remembered that naming calls; no sooner had I had that thought than the man himself came cantering up. Well, I suppose if you see your grandfather’s banner unexpectedly you tend to drop whatever you’re doing and find out what brought him this far east. As Robert and Lord Estermont shook hands and roared jovial greetings at each other I couldn’t help but be struck by Robert’s appearance. Handsome he undoubtedly was, a proper maiden’s fantasy, but I never saw a king so plainly dressed. If it weren’t for the gold circlet around his head, the surcoat over his half-armor with the black crowned stag on yellow, and the two coins strung around his neck, you’d have thought he was a well-to-do landed knight, not a king. At the time I figured that the plainness of Robert’s wardrobe was due to spending all his money on his army, but later I learned that it was part of his legend and theory of kingship. A king, he was of the opinion, only needed the full fig of royal regalia if he couldn’t command the respect and admiration of his people with his deeds. Load of rot, you ask me, but it seemed to work for him; I suppose it’s easy to command people’s respect when you’re Robert Baratheon.

After the rest of the introductions were made, Septon Martyn and I were sent off to find a place in the encampment where our party could bed down while Lord Estermont joined Robert in reviewing the Legion at drill. Personally, I was glad to be sent forth from the royal presence; it had been a long ride from Myr city and my arse was declaring its readiness to kill me unless I got out of the saddle. If I had known how much riding awaited us over the next few months I would have found some way to come down with a debilitating but not too dangerous illness, but I’m a knight, not a fortune teller.
The Stag and The Stormcrow

The Stag and The Stormcrow

First there came the outriders, the scouts and raiders of the Royal Army of Myr. They were a varied crew, a mixture of freeriders who couldn’t afford the weight of armor necessary to serve as a knight, renegade Dornish who had made the Principality too hot to hold them with the King’s Hounds enforcing the law, and herdsmen from across the Seven Kingdoms who had been drawn by the prospect of a life that wasn’t spent eternally looking at the south end of a north-bound cow, as the saying went. Some of them, primarily the Dornish, carried horsebows, but more commonly they carried longbows or crossbows that they dismounted to fire, and for hand weapons they carried spears, axes, and swords. Their defensive armament consisted of padded jacks and light ring-mail shirts for the most part, while a few carried small round shields. The cloth badges they wore stitched onto the breasts of their jacks and mail shirts mostly depicted the arms of Lord Lyn Corbray, a single raven perched on the hilt of a longsword, for the Lord Lieutenant of Sirmium was the man most responsible for the development of the light cavalry of the Royal Army, due to the need for a force to patrol the border that was more mobile than a heavy cavalry squadron.

After the outriders passed, warily scanning the horizon, there came the vanguard. These were the companies that were based in and around the town of Sirmium, marching under Lord Corbray’s colors and the golden lion on scarlet of his chief lieutenant in addition to the spear and broken chain of the Legion and the sunset sky and impaled dragon’s head that was the war-banner of the Kingdom of Myr. As they were in enemy territory, they marched in full armor, with the knights and men-at-arms of the cavalry companies wearing all but their helmets and the squires leading the already-barded destriers on short reins. In the event of an attack that had slipped by the outriders or, more likely, an outrider galloping back to alert them of an impending attack, it wouldn’t take more than a minute for the knights to don their helmets and remount onto their destriers. And while they did so they would be shielded from a sudden onset, for the cavalry marched within a protective shell of infantry like a three-sided rectangle, one company leading in line and the other two on the flanks in column. Alongside the infantry and cavalry there marched the Corps of Pioneers in their leather aprons with their tools sloped over their shoulders and their carts of lumber and rope lumbering along behind them, ready to bridge, straighten, level, or fell any territorial impediment to the army’s advance.

Immediately behind them came the main body of the army, the companies drawn from Myr city, its environs, and the heartland of the kingdom between the coast and the borders. The most prominent banner here, aside from the great war-banner, was the crowned stag of the king, but it was hardly alone. Just beside it there flew the running direwolf of the King’s Fist, the black salmon of the Master of Soldiers, and dozens of other banners announcing the presence of a full third of the nobility and chivalry of the Kingdom of Myr. Here, too, the cavalry marched in the center of a cordon of infantry, ready at any moment to turn and face an attack. The army trusted its outriders, who were deployed on their flanks as well as ahead of them, but Ser Brynden Tully had hammered on the need to exercise reasonable caution and King Robert had agreed with him. It might be embarrassing to act as if they were afraid of the enemy, he had pointed out to some of his more belligerent nobles, but it would be even more embarrassing to die because they had walked into an ambush that any fool could have spotted if they had taken proper precautions.

Immediately behind the main body came the baggage train, two hundred heavy wains and almost exactly twice that number of lighter carts loaded with all the needs of an army. These were followed by a herd of cattle, sheep, and other beasts that had been driven off of Tyroshi estates
since crossing the border, meat on the hoof to supplement the rough flatbread, pottage, and hard cheese that were a soldier’s typical fare. The carters and drovers responsible for the baggage train were also armed, in order to fight off any attempt to steal or destroy the army’s supplies, and also to mark them as being part of the army, and due the respect that was the right of every soldier of the Royal Army.

Wherever they passed they brought destruction. The outriders were the most guilty of deliberate devastation, for among their orders was the pillage of the great estates of the Tyroshi elite, the which task they carried out with savage glee. Every great house they came across was stormed, ransacked, and burned, often enough with the owners still in it, either dead or alive. The slaves who had worked the estate were unchained and given an escort back towards the army, where they were drafted into either the Pioneers or the baggage train, unless they were taken on as a general servant-recruit by one of the companies. Bridges and culverts along the line of march were zealously guarded, but those that weren’t were torn down or burned in order to prevent the army being flanked. Any Tyroshi freeman caught on the road was almost invariably killed, unless they were smart enough to surrender on the spot and declare themselves wealthy enough to pay ransom.

The rest of the army was almost as bad. Twelve thousand men, almost five times as many animals, and six hundred wheeled vehicles would damage almost any surface they marched on, and while the roads of the Disputed Lands were relatively well-established, they were not the nigh-impenetrable dragonroads of Old Valyria. Where the army marched the land was alternately pounded flat by tramping boots and torn up by clopping hooves, so that the ground was almost mutilated by their passage. If there had been rain the army would have left a quagmire in its wake, but there had been no rain for two weeks and so in place of a sea of mud the army was trailed by clouds of dust. Where the army camped all wood for almost a mile around, whether trees, fence rails, or houses and barns, went for the legion of fires that twelve thousand men required to do their nightly cooking. What the army didn’t trample down or consume, the baggage train did, especially at night when the drovers herded their beasts off the road to graze.

This trail of destruction zig-zagged across the Tyroshi borderland for almost a hundred miles in the opening sennights of the war, mirrored almost exactly in parallel a few miles opposite, for the Royal Army of Myr and the Army of Tyrosh were maneuvering to try and gain a position of advantage over each other. King Robert Baratheon of Myr sought a place where he could trap the Tyroshi army and destroy it, while Captain-General Daario Naharis of Tyrosh sought to force the Myrish army to attack him in a place where he could use the terrain to nullify the Myrish advantage in cavalry. As a by-product of these opposing strategies almost a thousand Tyroshi citizens were killed and hundreds more rendered destitute as the borderlands were devastated for the second time in almost as many years. Many of those who had gambled on improving their fortunes by commandeering a destroyed estate and rebuilding it as their own saw their dreams of riches quite literally go up in smoke as the armies stalked each other. Even those that didn’t lose homes and lives saw their fortunes plummet as their slaves seized the opportunity provided by the chaos and ran for the border or the Myrish army, depending on which they thought was closer. On two estates the slaves outright revolted on hearing of the Royal Army’s proximity and their masters’ plans to flee to the interior. Both of these revolts were successful, but only narrowly and bloodily, with almost twice as many slaves being killed or wounded as masters, guards, and overseers, for the Tyroshi had learned from the Great Raid that servile insurrection could not be met with any countermeasure but swift and overwhelming violence, and the slaves knew that to lose was to die.

But for all the tumult, the armies only fought each other through their outriders. A proper battle, where the fate of the borderlands would be settled, continued to evade both armies, much to the consternation of the men commanding them.
The captains of the Royal Army of Myr sat around the table in various degrees of disgruntlement. They weren’t used to being denied their prey, and the way in which the Tyroshi army had fended them off over the past sennight put them in a sour mood. Especially since a round of debate lively enough to put even the veteran squires serving them on edge had established that their lack of good fortune was no one’s fault; apparently, the Tyroshi were just that good at outfoxing them. And so far, none of them had been able to come up with an idea to change the situation.

“We’re looking at the problem backwards,” Robert said suddenly, making everyone glance at him in sudden attention. “We’ve been trying to fight the Tyroshi army, but we don’t need to.”

Akhollo frowned. “Doesn’t fighting a war usually involve fighting an enemy army?” he asked skeptically.

“Not when you consider our goals and circumstances as opposed to the Tyroshi’s,” Robert replied. “We’re fighting this war to conquer Tyrosh and free its slaves, or as much of it and as many of them as we can before the Braavosi call us to heel.” There was a round of sour chuckles around the table. For all that Braavos was the Kingdom of Myr’s closest ally, there were still sore feelings against them for the part they had played in crafting the Peace of Pentos and its insulting terms. “The Tyroshi, on the other hand, are fighting this war in order to keep us out of their territory and keep their slaves,” Robert went on. “And we got over the border first. That being so, in order for us to obtain our goals, all we need to do is march into the Tyroshi interior and start taking towns. The Tyroshi, though, need to face us in battle and defeat us in order to achieve their goals.”

Ser Brynden frowned. “In that case, they should be maneuvering much more aggressively than they have been,” he said. “Instead of us trying to trap them, they should be trying to trap us. But they’ve been content to let us chase them hither and yon, keeping one step ahead of us the while. If they need to fight and defeat us, then they should be trying to catch us in a situation where we’d have to fight at a disadvantage.”

“Unless whoever’s commanding them isn’t confident of victory,” Eddard mused, drumming his fingertips on the table. “Who is commanding the Tyroshi?”

Ser Brynden flipped through his papers for a moment. “One Daario Naharis,” he said, finding the correct report, “Tyroshi-born, but a sellsword all his adult life. Former lieutenant in the Stormcrows, fought at Tara, led the remnant of the Stormcrows out of Myrish service after that battle, entered Tyroshi service about a month before the Peace of Pentos, according to Ser Gerion’s sources.” He frowned. “If he fought at Tara with the Stormcrows, that might explain why he’s being so damned cagy. From what I’ve heard, your horsemen handled them pretty roughly, Ned.”

Lyn leaned forward in his chair, lowering his hands from where he had steepled them in front of his face. “If we need to march into the Tyroshi interior and take towns,” he said, “then let us start with Alalia. It’s the hub of the Tyroshi lands’ south-eastern district, and it sits astride the crossroads of the main north-south and east-west roads in this quarter of the Disputed Lands. If we take Alalia then we can dominate the whole countryside hereabouts.” A quick stroke of Lyn’s finger on the map laid out on the table indicated a rough right triangle ten miles along the height formed by the Myrish border and thirty-five miles along the base formed by the Lyseni border, with the long side formed by the Turtle River, a broad but shallow and slow-flowing stream that ran roughly northeast from the Whitestone Hills to empty into the Sea of Myrth about five miles over the Myrish border.

“Agreed,” Akhollo said, leaning forward himself. “From what the new freedmen tell us, that area is well watered by Turtle River and its vassal streams; the estates there are very fertile, in crops and
livestock both. And they have many slaves as a result.” He grinned savagely. “And also much wealth in Alalia, from the petty magisters who cannot afford to live on Tyrosh isle except for a small part of the year, and the factors who deal in the produce of the estates.” The captains all nodded. The destruction of slavery was a fine and worthy goal, but insofar as the business of the kingdom was concerned, Akhollo had just listed the most attractive fruits of any war. Thousands of new subjects, fertile and productive land to support them, a rich town to stimulate commerce, and a fair bit of ready cash to reward the army for its service and sacrifices.

Robert nodded. “So starting tomorrow we’ll stop this feinting and march straight for Alalia,” he said, drawing his finger across the map, “and we’ll dare this Daario Naharis to stop us. If he stands and fights, well and good. If not, then we’ll storm Alalia and make him look like a coward who won’t use the army the Archon’s given him.”

XXX

Daario glared at the scrap of parchment that the scout’s report was written on and manfully resisted the urge to tear it to bits, or ball it up and throw it away. The Myrish, it seemed, had lost patience with maneuvering and were tromping down the road towards Alalia. The force he had set to watch the bridge at Pipe Creek had been brushed aside by Lyn Corbray and Jaime Lannister’s outriders, and by now the Myrish would have almost all their force across Pipe Creek.

He transferred his glare from the parchment to the western horizon, thinking furiously. Alalia wasn’t strategically critical, in the grand scheme of things; it’s loss and that of the farms and mines in its hinterland would be a blow, but a survivable one, in that it wouldn’t cause the city to starve or go bankrupt. Politically, however, the loss of Alalia would be intolerable. Quite a few of the Archon’s council had estates around Alalia, and Daario could already hear their howls of outrage at the loss of productive estates and valuable slaves. In the broader population the outrage would be that the barbarian Andals and their rogue slaves had gotten so far into the Tyroshi heartland and wrought their outrages on Tyroshi citizens.

If Alalia fell without a fight, then there would be questions asked about why the upjumped sellsword, who had been given command over more deserving men by a perhaps-too-indulgent Archon, had not fought to prevent the sacred soil of Tyrosh from falling into the hands of the barbarians and their renegade bondsmen. Questions that could all too easily become sharp, hot, or heavy, if not a combination of the three. Daario might have regained his Tyroshi citizenship after rejoining the city’s service and so was theoretically legally protected from torture, but citizenship could be revoked as a punishment for treason. And you could easily make a case that refusing to fight for a major town constituted treason; he could hear Varoros framing the argument already. The Archon might be his patron, but at the end of the day, the Archon always held his position at the pleasure of the conclave, which could be called for a special session to debate and vote on a motion of no confidence on the recommendation of a majority of the Archon’s council. Daario wasn’t willing to trust his personal, precious, and irreplaceable neck to the strength of the Archon’s political position, especially since, as the man’s client, his fortunes reflected on the Archon.

Daario stuffed the parchment into his belt purse and sent his manservant to summon his officers. He had an army to turn around.

King Robert’s turn towards Alalia, risky as it was in that it exposed the Royal Army’s flank to the Tyroshi, was a calculated risk; Robert was gambling that his army’s superior march discipline would allow them to outrun the Tyroshi until they came to a suitable battlefield. Four days after executing the turn, and twenty-three days after crossing the border, that battlefield came to hand . . .
- *Freedom or Death: An Overview of the Slave Wars* by Maester Julian, published 2182 AC
You need an uncommonly detailed map to find Solva these days, mostly because it doesn’t exist anymore; the Myrish outriders burnt it out and those that survived decided to try their luck elsewhere. It was a little village about four days ride from Alalia that had sprung up because it lay where the main east-west road through the Tyroshi interior crossed Hatchet Stream and it was a convenient day’s ride to the two nearest plantations. It’s always the small, unknown places that seem to attract great battles, though; Tara was a sleepy country estate, Narrow Run a magister’s playground, and the Battle of the Greenblood took place along a deserted stretch of the high road along the river. I don’t know if its fate, the gods, or the imp of the perverse, but whatever it was, it put both the Royal Army of Myr and the Army of Tyrosh at Solva at the same time, and that’s as good a way to start a battle as any.

The land around Solva was primarily pastureland, thanks to the demand for the village to supply meat to the nearby plantations, to its inns, and to Alalia, and it was divided into great lots by hedgerows much like the ones in the Crownlands. One of these lots, lying just across the road to the north of Solva with the bridge at its southwest corner, had been turned into an improvised fortress by the Pioneers, who had spent the past day and half the night chopping down some of the foliage along the north and east-facing hedgerows and weaving it into the rest to form makeshift barriers. The south-facing hedgerow had been mostly cleared of vegetation and two channels twenty feet wide hacked through the bank to allow for wheeled vehicles to pass through. A regular little castle it was, if you had infantry to hold it with, and in the Iron Legion the Royal Army had the best infantry in the world at that time.

The Army of Tyrosh had come down out of the northeast and spent the night opposite us, about a mile distant. Most of them, about ten thousand, were spear-and-crossbow militia, Tyroshi citizens who were ordinarily yeoman farmers or urban tradesmen. The other fifteen hundred were sellsword cavalry, the Ragged Standard, the Bright Banners, and the Second Sons. It was certainly respectable, as armies went; the militia weren’t a patch on the Iron Legion but they would fight bravely enough for their homes and their families, and the sellswords would fight because that was what they were paid to do. And the man commanding them, Daario Naharis, was a clever sod of a sellsword who knew his business, and also knew that he didn’t dare let us get to Alalia without fighting for it. If they let us any deeper into the Tyroshi interior the slave revolt would make the one in Myr look like a harvest festival, and that and the army’s devastations would tear the guts out of Tyrosh’s economy.

So when Robert, cool as willie-be-damned, started sending his baggage train across Hatchet Stream, Naharis threw the lever and went at him like a lightning bolt. I don’t mind telling you that it was more than a little unnerving seeing almost twelve thousand men coming at us with murderous intent, but then the skinpipers that Maege Mormont had brought across the sea with her struck up that hideous droning wail and Ned Stark led the Iron Legion to their positions and I began to feel much better. After all, I was on the Legion’s side, and for the first several minutes of the battle my optimism seemed justified enough as the Legion met the Tyroshi militia at the hedgerows and cut them up something dreadful. I’m told that Septon Jonothor was right there with them, tramping up and down the line with an iron-bound staff in one hand and shouting quotes from the Seven-Pointed Star with the other septons while the red priests did the same thing with their own scriptures. Having met the man, I wouldn’t be surprised; I don’t know what it is about
god-botherers that makes them so careless of their own lives and so convinced that they’re doing the right thing, but whatever it is Jonothor had enough of it for five men. No wonder he caused so much trouble. I was just thinking that things seemed well in hand when I looked out towards the right and I felt my heart go into my throat.

Naharis had put all fifteen hundred of his cavalry on that flank and it was coming down the road like water down a pipe. If they managed to get all the way down that road to the bridge, then two things would happen. One, the sellswords would be able to cut off and swallow the supply wagons that had already gotten across Hatchet Stream, which would be bad enough. Two, they would be able to swarm over the southern face of the Royal Army’s position and break it open from the inside. Especially since the only uncommitted forces in the lot were the hundred lances of Robert’s bodyguard; the rest of our cavalry had ridden off in the night and was nowhere to be seen. And three to one, or so I thought, was poor odds for anybody, even men that Ser Brynden Tully and Eddard Stark had taken a personal hand in training.

Well, I was punished for thinking that things were about to go to shit, because on top of being a bonny fighter Robert had a useful head on his shoulders, and in the Blackfish and the Iron Wolf he had two of the canniest generals of the day. No sooner had the sellsword cavalry gotten within a hundred yards of the east-facing hedgerow than a horn sounded and out from a sunken road between two lots just east of Solva came the Royal Army’s cavalry, Jaime Lannister and four hundred knights and squires that barged into the flank of that charge and turned them from a wave of oncoming destruction into a chaotic mess of falling riders and struggling beasts with the knights plunging further in to complete the overthrow while the valets, archers, and pages moved in on foot to establish a position.

It was the neatest flank attack I ever saw and ever hope to see; the knights of the Royal Orders couldn’t have done it better and I saw them try. Within a minute the melee was starting to collapse as sellswords streamed away in flight, while the horns blew wildly to reform and next to me Lord Estermont was standing in his stirrups bellowing triumphantly. “That’s the way, boys!” was one of the more restrained things he said. “By the gods, that’s the way! That’s how you fix their hash!” A little way over Robert himself was also standing in the stirrups roaring approbation, with the knights of his bodyguard hammering gauntlets against breastplates in applause, and then Robert was shouting orders and the horns were blowing again and Robert was leading his bodyguard out through one of the lanes cut into the bank. That set Lord Estermont off good and proper. “There he goes!” he roared. “Out to finish them off, by the gods! That’s the way to do it!” He hesitated for only a moment before throwing caution to the winds entirely. “Guy, my lance! Lances ready sers, we’re going with them!”

My initial thought was that I’d misheard him, but then a lance was shoved into my fist and he and the other five men-at-arms in our party were cantering away and my horse, idiot screw that he was, was cantering after them and I realized that he was quite serious. He had no business doing it of course, we were a fact-finding mission for all love, we weren’t even supposed to be anywhere near the border much less thirteen days ride over it, but that didn’t matter to him. His grandson was going to fight and he would be damned if he didn’t ride with him. Besides which, Robert was that kind of man; if he went somewhere you followed, even if you couldn’t explain why for the life of you. I wouldn’t have, for a pension, but I’ve got a windy streak wider than the Trident, so maybe it was just me.

Not that it mattered by that point. Backing out would be impossible, in broad daylight with everyone able to see. So instead I placed myself in the second rank as we joined Robert’s guards; whoever took the brunt of the charge, it wouldn’t be me if I had anything to say about it. We caught up to the cavalry just as they had straightened themselves out, placed ourselves in their center as another hundred lances joined us on the right, and then the horns blew and the charge
began.

I heard afterward that the Tyroshi started to break before the charge even began and the gods know that it felt like it at first. What I didn’t know until afterward was that as soon as Daario Naharis saw his cavalry collapse, he had given the order to retreat. Quite rightly, in my opinion, with fifteen hundred heavy horse and mounted infantry on his left flank ready to come down on him like a hammer on a nail and nothing to put in their way. And after an hour of bouncing off the Iron Legion the militia were ready to oblige. The Legion didn’t like that above half and if they’d had their way not one of the Tyroshi militia would have escaped. But the same fortifications that had helped them handle the Tyroshi so easily kept them from pursuing; depending on who you ask it took the Pioneers anywhere between ten and twenty minutes to get to the front and dismantle the fortifications to let the Legion through. And unless you’ve seen a man run for his life, you really don’t know how much ground he can cover in that length of time. Suffice to say that its more than you might think.

Of course, even men running for their lives are slower than cavalry and for the first several minutes we just rode over them. There’s nothing in the world quite like riding down a fleeing man and swinging your sword back into his face; it’s a lot like being drunk except you feel like your blood’s been replaced by chain lightning. You feel invincible, almost god-like, like there’s nothing in the world that can stop you. Right up until someone belts you across the face. Which is what Daario Naharis did.

How he managed it I don’t know but somehow he managed to rally a few hundred of his sellswords and led them in a counter-charge that caught us about halfway through his infantry. At the time it was just a wild chaos of shouting men and screaming horses and the clangor of metal on metal, but at this remove I can see it for the neat little counter-punch it was; quickly in, bam, to throw us off our stride and into confusion, and then quickly out again, to do it again when we had sorted ourselves out. Nor was he alone in doing so. On the far side of the army a company of Myrish exiles and their in-laws refused to break and run. Instead they retired at a walk, in formation, turning back every now and then to lock horns with anyone who tried to complete the rout by breaking them. As the Blackfish put it afterwards, “Slaver bastards, perhaps, but brave men withal. They deserve a better cause.”

I learned later that between that company and the cavalry Naharis had rallied, the Army of Tyrosh managed to put up a fighting retreat for almost ten miles, with Jaime Lannister and Lyn Corbray chewing away at the rearguard like bulldogs, but I didn’t see all of that. My horse gave out and collapsed about four miles in and I sprained my ankle bad enough in leaping clear that all I could do was sit myself on the beast and wait for someone to collect me when the fighting was done. Thank blind idiot luck for that, too, because apparently the last few clashes were downright vicious, including one exchange where Daario came up against Jaime Lannister and only escaped by dint of killing Jaime’s horse at the first opportunity. Not that I knew or cared, then; all I wanted was for my damned ankle to stop throbbing.
Petyr Baelish finished off the last sentence of the order he was drafting, placed his pen in its inkwell, and carefully stretched the incipient cramp out of his hand as he sanded the ink with his other hand. Long hours of writing had given him almost as much strength and control in that hand as a swordsman, but four twelve-hour days would take a toll on anyone.

Not that he had expected royal service to be a cushy job. A kingdom on the make needed every wheel to be turning at full speed with a minimum of squeaking. He had found this out for himself when Lord Stark had found him a clerkship in a Port warehouse; Lord Captain of the Port Franlan tolerated no sluggards in his workforce, be they watchman, clerk, or stevedore. Even the slowdown in trade caused by the war hadn’t lightened the workload. On the contrary, Franlan had taken the names of those clerks who found themselves idled by lack of business and given the list to Ser Gerion with the offer to loan them out to him until trade picked back up.

Which was how Petyr had come to be a supply clerk in the Royal Army of Myr, which in layman’s terms meant that his world had turned into a side room that held eight tables each eight feet square, a rack of cubbyholes each stuffed with papers, and a supply of ink and spare quills. In any given hour, Petyr might have to report how many feet of half-inch rope lay in Myr city’s warehouses, grade a request by a village militia commander for extra crossbows and recommend to his superior whether to approve or deny the request, and draft an order to ship five hundredweight of wheat to Campora to top up its siege stores. And whenever something was sent out or received, it had to be signed for by the person disbursing it, the person transporting it, the person receiving it, and the clerk who had written up the order for transport, which generated even more papers.

That was one reason that Petyr hadn’t tried to give his salary a little covert augmentation. If, for instance, he arranged for a few military crossbows to fall off the back of a wagon, then he would have to bring at least two other people into the scheme, which was two too many for comfort. As the saying went, three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead. And even if his cohorts kept their silence, all it took was one royal inspector noticing a discrepancy between what someone said they had and what they actually had to break the scheme open; the trail of signed papers would lead right to Petyr and his conspirators.

That was the other reason Petyr hadn’t dipped his fingers into the till. The royal inspectors didn’t just inspect the state of the town garrisons and the fitness of the Legion companies; they inspected every branch of royal government from top to bottom. And when they found something out of order, correction followed with the speed and finality of a thrown axe. The day before Petyr had transferred to War House, the sprawling manse that Ser Brynden Tully had made the great brain of the Royal Army, a master clerk in the Palace of Justice had been caught embezzling and every scribbler who wore the livery and took the pay of the Kingdom of Myr had been ordered to attend his execution.

At first, Petyr had thought that it was a show, that the unfortunate would be taken up to the scaffold and the noose placed on his neck before a messenger came hotfoot from the Palace of Justice with a grant of clemency, or at least a stay of execution. But the noose had been tightened, the red priest had recited the death prayer, and Petyr and almost four hundred other clerks watched in shock as the lever was pulled and the embezzler dropped. But not far enough to break his neck, oh no, the headsman had given the embezzler the short drop, so that instead of having his neck broken he had slowly strangled. It had taken the poor sod almost ten minutes to die, with his face slowly turning blue and his eyes bulging as he fought for air. Eventually he had gone limp, and the headsman had made sure of his demise by grabbing onto his ankles and yanking down hard.
Petyr prided himself on being a fast learner and the lesson had been tolerably clear: *Keep your sticky fingers to yourself, if you know what’s good for you.* And at that, the man had apparently been lucky to be hanged. Ducking out to the local bakery for lunch one day, Petyr had overheard a pair of Legion spearmen discussing the embezzler and what they would have done to him if he’d been handed over to them as they had requested. He had lost his appetite entirely after only a few sentences.

So he kept his hands to himself and his head down; there was plenty of time still to make his fortune and something would turn up. He had already made a fair bit investing in a few cargoes of glassware that had gone to Braavos and King’s Landing; it wasn’t strictly forbidden for royal employees to invest and speculate on trade so long as they only did so with their own money and didn’t abuse their position in the process. The war had put a stop to that for now, but he had an investment lined up with the Weaver’s Guild as soon as trade resumed its normal flow. He might wear plain clothes and eat plain food for now, but time and a continuance of his newfound luck would change that, among other things.

He gently set the order into the tray designated for outgoing papers and reached for the next paper in the tray designated for incomers. There were several hours left to go before the office closed and the stack in his incoming tray was still two inches thick.

XXX

Roryn Pyke laboriously scratched out his signature on the report to Ser Gerion on the probe that had been fended off two days ago; he had been learning to read and write since being named castellan of Ironhold, but he still relied on a scribe for anything longer or more complicated than a short message. After he finished writing he handed the report back to his scribe to be sealed and sent off by dispatch rider and turned to glower out the window at the sea.

By all rights the Sea of Myrth should be a Myrish sea in truth, but the fact remained that the Royal Navy could do no more than protect the littoral and the coastal shelf and make occasional forays out into the open sea. The slaver fleets were simply too numerous and, if Roryn was being entirely honest, too competent to challenge for a fleet that still numbered less than seventy galleys; longships made excellent patrol and raiding craft, but they couldn’t fight galleys on even terms and expect to win. The Ironmaker’s victory had been won by surprise, and those actions where a Myrish longship had beaten a slaver galley had almost uniformly been won by a boarding action after an error in maneuvering had allowed the longship to get alongside the galley. There were ways to force such errors in maneuvering, if you had the numbers to threaten each galley from multiple angles, but Roryn, Victarion, and Dagmer Cleftjaw had worked out that the most reliable method of doing so required a lone galley to be opposed by three longships.

The slavers, the god curse them, had taken to sailing in squadrons of three or four galleys, and operating in close concert as they did so. That made things infinitely more difficult; not that it was impossible to force the kind of errors you needed to win, but you needed to have four or five times the number of longships in order to do so, and you needed all the skill you could muster and all the special favor you could cadge out of the god in order to do so. And even under the best of circumstances the Drowned God was stingy with his favor. Only those who had already done all that mortal might and craft could accomplish could reasonably expect him to take a hand.

So Lord Captain Franlan was building new galleys as fast as he could, while off the shore the Royal Navy did the best they could to keep the coastal villages from being attacked as they had been in the first war. But for all the valor the Navy showed in protecting the coast, they couldn’t reopen the Sea of Myrth to trade. The slavers had announced the Sea of Myrth to be closed to trade on pain of attack, and proved it by sinking a slew of merchant vessels in the opening days of the
war. Dispatch riders had already been sent north to Pentos requesting the aid of the Braavosi fleet on the grounds that the Peace of Pentos had guaranteed freedom of navigation, but it would take some time for that aid to come, if it came at all. In the meantime, the merchants of Ironhold and Myr city were being forced to tighten their belts and explore other means of making a living. More than a few merchant’s sons had joined the Royal Navy in order to contribute a sailor’s wages towards the maintenance of their families, while their mothers and sisters took in sewing and embroidery and their fathers turned their gazes inland.

At least Ironhold was more or less immune to attack. The harbor defenses were essentially a copy of those protecting the port of Myr, augmented by the fact that the town castle, a stoutly constructed citadel in the fashion of the holdfasts of the Iron Isles, was placed on the shore at the western end of the harbor. Moreover, the town’s buildings were strongly built, whether of stone or wood, and each household, shop, and place of business was required to maintain at least one water barrel and four buckets per floor against fire. The probe he was reporting to Ser Gerion had been a pair of Tyroshi galleys that had flirted with the extreme range of the springaulds on the harbor mole towers. A few desultory bolts back and forth, and a hand of longships putting out from the docks, had convinced the slavers to try their luck elsewhere.

Roryn’s lip curled into a snarl; he hated feeling unable to protect the livelihood of his people, and if he knew Victarion it would be eating at the young lord’s soul like rats in a granary. At least Victarion was out at sea where he could do something about it. Roryn, by contrast, was stuck in Ironhold listening to his scribe read out reports and petitions and taking out his frustrations on the pell and those of the town garrison who would brave his increasingly foul mood in order to spar with him.

XXX

A properly brought-up Lyseni aristocrat didn’t show strong emotion in public. Not that they couldn’t show emotion at all, even grief was acceptable if you were in mourning. But it had to understated; a discreet sniffle and a lone tear was perfectly within the bounds of civilized behavior, wailing and floods of tears not so much. Such extravagant displays of unbridled emotion were for barbarians, not the well-bred scions of Lys the Lovely.

But on finding that his path was blocked by yet another fortified village, Cladio Pyrrius couldn’t help himself. He thumped his fist on the pommel of his saddle and spat a caustic string of oaths that made his lieutenants edge backward as they traded nervous glances. Cladio snarled a final imprecation that he had heard on one of his uncle’s ships, which cursed its target, its progeny, and its ancestors unto the fourth generation, and finally subsided, forcing himself to review the situation dispassionately as he deliberately slowed his breathing.

He had come over the border ten days ago with three thousand mounted light infantry and light horse under his command; it was well short of the commitment promised by the mutual defense treaty with Tyrosh, but it was what could be spared from the defenses while the army was being restructured. In any case, he had been ordered to do all the damage he could to the Myrish countryside in order to draw troops away from the invasion of Tyrosh, or at least render the Myrish southeastern frontier incapable of supporting an army. A sound enough strategy, but the cracks had appeared almost immediately.

To name only one, the damned Andals hadn’t been caught with their pants down, as some of the more optimistic members of the conclave had theorized. On his first day over the border he had seen no less than six signal fires, and the purpose of them had become apparent only two days later, when his army came across their first fortified village. It hadn’t been anything special, simply a ditch-and-rampart affair with a palisade along the rampart and short, but no less significant towers
at each corner bastion. But it had contained the inhabitants of every nearby farm, down to the livestock; Cladio’s scouts had found nothing greater than a chicken in any of the farmhouses within a day’s ride of the fortified villages, and no valuables either. The farms had been burned, of course, but with the crops only recently planted the only things that could be burned were the buildings, fruit trees, and vineyards that couldn’t be brought within the villages.

He had stormed the first of those villages, of course; he would not have it said that he was afraid to try conclusions against slaves and peasants. But it had been far more difficult than he was expecting. The first storming party had been shot apart by crossbow volleys without getting within fifty feet of the wall. The second storming party, better supported with missile fire and employing improvised mantlets, had gotten to the walls but had been forced to retreat after a short but vicious contest atop the palisade. At that point Cladio had lost his temper and ordered the gates to be burned. This had been accomplished, and a substantial section of the palisade on either side of the gatehouse burned down as well before the bucket brigade overwhelmed the flames, but the villagers had dug a shallow ditch and assembled a barricade from the excavated earth and other materials that allowed them to cover the new gap in the walls with crossbowmen in cover supported by spearmen. It hadn’t saved them in the end, but for the privilege of reducing the village to a corpse-strewn ruin Cladio’s force had paid a heavy price. A hundred and thirty-six men had either been killed outright or died of their wounds, while another two hundred had been too badly wounded to continue with the raid and three hundred more were lightly wounded.

Claudio, for his part, had been more aghast that none of the defenders of the village appeared to be regular soldiers. They had all been peasants, albeit peasants wielding military weapons. His patrician soul rebelled at the idea of an armed peasantry trained and willing to fight, but he could not deny the evidence before his eyes. The fact that of the three villages they had encountered since every one of them had been fortified and defended provided even more evidence. The Kingdom of Myr simply couldn’t have enough trained soldiers to invade Tyrosh, garrison Myr city and their principal towns, and protect every village; the numbers required would bankrupt them. Instead, it appeared, the Myrish had armed and trained their peasants to defend themselves, and built those ungodly fortified villages to further help them do so, in order to allow them to concentrate their soldiers in the major towns, Myr city, and their field army.

Confirmation of that theory would have to wait on further information however, and while Cladio was willing to try and find out the hard way, that was no longer an option. After losing just over a tenth of his strength at that nameless, never-to-be-sufficiently-damned village, he didn’t have the numbers to storm more villages and protect himself against a counter-stroke. Especially since the companies stationed at Campora had sallied out to take the field against him. He did outnumber them by about half their numbers again and was far more mobile than the heavy infantry and heavy cavalry of the Iron Legion, but their commander was mirroring his movements on the inner of two concentric arcs, which meant that he had fundamentally less ground to cover in order to keep Cladio from penetrating further. And Cladio knew better than to fight head-on against heavy foot and armored lancers with light foot and light horse.

Claudio shrugged. He had been told to do all the damage to the Myrish frontier that he could, and he had done so. Along his whole line of march there was not a farmhouse that remained unburnt or an orchard that had not been cut down. He had also been ordered to preserve his force insofar as he was able within the confines of his other orders and so far, he had lost only two hundred and fifty men killed and wounded. His family’s rivals in the conclave couldn’t argue with successfully completed orders. Especially since he had made sure that each of his entries in the running log that detailed the travails of his command had been countersigned by two of his subordinates. It was one thing to accuse a commander of cowardice or inability, but quite another to extend that accusation to the full roster of his subordinate officers.
He turned and started giving orders. They would inflict what devastation they could on the lands around the village, and then begin the withdrawal. It galled him to withdraw without at least spying the towers of Campora, but that was the fault of the men who’d given him a raiding force instead of a proper army. If the conclave had any sense and read his reports, they wouldn’t try an invasion again without a larger force, a proper supply train, and siege engines.

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